

Test Of A Friendship

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Summary: Herc makes a pact with Ares to protect the Academy

## 1. Default Chapter Title

DISCLAIMER: Young Hercules and all the characters that lie within the T.V show, regrettably, do not belong to me. And believe me, I would love to lay claim to Dean O'Gorman, especially wearing Iolaus's leather pants. Yow. But I digress - this is purely for entertainment purposes only, so don't sue - you didn't really want the lint in my pockets anyway. We college students generate a lot of lint.

RATING: R - if you're not a fan of graphic descriptions of violence turn back now.

FEEDBACK: Anyone who knows me, knows that feedback is my addiction! Constructive criticism is indeed welcome but flamers will be attacked by my pet Squirtle, my right-hand pokemon. (did they have pokemon in Ancient Greece? Ooooh! Cross over time!!)

Yes, Shadowcat. I know it's been done. I remain in awe of your talent.

NOTES: I really am a fan of H:TLJ and X:WP shows - I thought Young Hercules was some lame idea to over-saturate the market and boost ratings. Well, I ate my fair share of crow after watching a couple of eps, and the one thing that struck me was the friendship the writers carefully cultivated between Hercules and Iolaus. Since that's a big part of both shows, it's a big part of my story. Capiche? No? Too bad. Deal with it.

Also, this is in response to a challenge set out by Athena001 on the posting list. Read and cast thy votes accordingly!

ADDITIONAL: Thoughts shown by use of: ( \_ )

Part 1

\_Apollo must be putting in some overtime\_, Iolaus thought wryly, raising an arm to wipe the sweat from his brow. Squinting up at the blazing sun, he snorted at the thought of the conceited young deity doing actual work. \_That'll be the day\_. Smiling, he headed back to the Academy, the jingle in his moneybag music to his ears. Who would have thought working at Kora's Tavern would be so profitable? Especially since he had finally learned that the dishes were meant to be handled carefully - that way they wouldn't break. He nodded wisely to himself - learning that little rule had almost doubled his paycheck. He began to whistle, increasing his pace until he was almost bouncing instead of walking. He'd been kind of surprised that neither Hercules, nor Jason had shown up at Kora's for dinner - the cooking there was ten times better than what the Academy cooks dished up for the cadets. He should know - Kora had warned him again about sampling tidbits from the plates of customers before sending them to the tables. Iolaus grinned widely. \_Much tastier\_. Iolaus rounded a corner along the path and came into sight of the Academy. The huge stone walls, built for protection, gave the Academy the image of a prison, especially with cadet sentries posted on the roof, bow and arrow at the ready. Iolaus shuddered slightly - he knew what prisons were like. The Academy was no prison. Sometimes Iolaus marvelled at the twists and turns of fate that had led him here - instead of a prison cell. In his former life as a thief, he'd never imagined that life could be like this. He had a warm bed every night, three square meals a day, was in training to become a warrior, and for the first time in his young life, he had friends. Real friends. Not like Cradus and his gang. Iolaus's eyes darkened slightly at the memories of his former associates coming to the Academy to rob the place blind. But they had been stopped, he reminded himself. Stopped by Hercules. A smile lit up his face at the thought of his best friend. If there was one person Iolaus knew he could always count on to back him up, it was the young demi-god he'd befriended back in Thebes. Hercules, half-god, half-mortal, the son of Zeus, was his best friend. And his other friend was Jason, Crown Prince of Corinth. \_You know what they say about friends in high places\_, he smiled to himself. As he walked up the Academy's main gates, he suddenly noticed the lack of students, milling about the grounds. Training exercises were done for the day, and students had the time before curfew to spend as they wished. But there was no one in the main yard. " Hmmm.." he murmured, crossing his arms in perplexation. He glanced back up at the wall - the cadet perched there had waved him in but Iolaus had barely acknowledged him. Now though, the small blond studied the weary frame held rigid as the sentry cast his eyes about nervously, as though he were expecting an attack. About to call to him and ask what was going on, Iolaus was rewarded with the sight of Jason leaving the stables and heading towards him, a slight limp in his steps. Dirt marred his princely features and exhaustion was written across his face. His eyes though, relaxed at the sight of Iolaus. " Iolaus - glad you're back. We could use the help."

Iolaus immediately went to him and helped support him. Jason thanked him with a grateful nod. " What happened?"

Jason snorted. " Strife and Discord happened. Again."

Iolaus blinked. " Yeesh, again? What is that, the fourth time in nearly two weeks?"

" Something like that," Jason said. Iolaus glanced about the

courtyard again, scanning for some sign of Hercules.

" Jase? Was Herc..."

" Huh?" Jason glanced at him and saw the worry on Iolaus's face. He shook his head. " Nah, Herc's okay. I guess. Since the attack ended, he's been running himself ragged trying to repair the damage. He feels responsible for it, even though we've told him it wasn't his fault."

" Ah, but you know the big guy." Iolaus and Jason reached the infirmary doors. " You gonna be okay? I want to go check on him."

" That's a switch - I thought it was you we had to babysit!" Jason chuckled as he went through the door, missing the playful swat Iolaus aimed at him by inches.

Iolaus headed back out to the main yard and went to the stables. After all, if Jason had been working there, that's the first place Herc would be, he reasoned. He quickened his pace. Hercules had a tendency to blame himself for everything the gods did, and therefore had to make up for whatever damage they caused. But even Hercules's unbelievable stamina had limits, and if Jason had said Hercules was looking tired, it had to mean he was exhausted but refusing to show it. Concern for his friend rose in him. It wasn't only that though. Hercules had been kind of...moody, for the past few days. Iolaus didn't know what caused it, but the demi-god had barely been eating, and his nights had been filled with restless sleep, tossing and turning in a vain attempt to find peace of mind. Asking him what was wrong, Iolaus had been brushed away with Hercules stating he'd deal with it. \_He's my best friend. If he needs space, I'll give him space. But I'm not gonna let him drop dead from exhaustion\_.

Reaching the stables, Iolaus stuck his head inside and was nearly hit with a bale of hay.

" Hey!" he yelped in mock outrage. Then he stopped. " Or should that be, 'Hay' ?" He looked around to see if the joke had registered but there was no response." Hercules?"

" In here," a muffled voice answered him, and Iolaus made his way past bales of hay and piles of manure until he saw Hercules repairing the back wall of the stable, pausing long enough to reach down and toss another mini-haystack out of his way. " You missed all the fun."

" So I hear." Iolaus studied his friend intently. Dirt streaked Hercules's tunic and leather pants, soot blackening areas of his arms and legs. " Did you get burned?"

" Huh?" Hercules paused in his hammering. He glanced down as if just realizing the state he was in, and then shrugged. " Not really."

Iolaus scowled. " Does Cheiron know you've been burned?"

" It's not a burn, " Hercules snapped, patience wearing thin. Weariness was evident throughout him and Iolaus noted with concern, the faint trembling in his friends hands and limbs. Herc resumed

hammering. " I just got a little too close to one of Strife's damned fireballs."

Iolaus stepped beside him. " Why don't ya let me finish this, and you take a breather?" He suggested casually, hand out to receive the hammer. Hercules gave him a faint smile.

" Thanks, but I got it." About to continue, hooves striking the ground reached both their ears and they turned to see Cheiron standing in the archway to the stables.

" Hercules, let Iolaus finish this part. I'd like to take a look at the wounds you sustained." The centaurs's tone was curiously gentle.

Hercules raked an impatient hand through his hair. " I said, I'll do it!" His voice was hard, but both cadet and teacher heard the note of desperation in his voice.

" What happened today, wasn't your fault," Cheiron said calmly, staring evenly at his student. Hercules snorted derisively.

" Oh, and I suppose Strife and Discord came here to attack you guys. It had nothing to do with me at all, of course!" Sarcasm laced his words, heavy and thick. Iolaus watched as his friend seemed to sway a bit on his feet and he subtley moved closer to offer his support should Hercules need it. Cheiron shook his head.

" You didn't ask for them to come--"

" You're right!" Hercules cut his teacher off in mid-sentence. " I didn't ask for them to come and attack the Academy. I didn't ask for them to come and hurt Jason and the other cadets. I didn't ask for THIS!" Hercules voice had raised with each word until he was shouting at his teacher. Iolaus watched, stunned, as Hercules abruptly sat down on a leftover bale of hay, and scrubbed his face with his hands. But when he looked up, there was no evidence of tears. No emotion showed from his face. Iolaus felt a twinge of worry at that. Like himself, Hercules's face sometimes read as a scroll, emotions written on his features as plain as day. But this time there was nothing. Only a great tiredness that seemed to envelope and crush him. Iolaus shook himself and walked over.

" Come on, big guy - time for beddy-bye," he grinned, hoping to ease the tension. Hercules gave him an exasperated look. " Don't do that - your face will freeze."

" Too bad your tongue won't," the demi-god muttered, but Iolaus knew he'd won that round. Hercules sighed as he allowed himself to be pulled up - it was impossible to be actually angry at Iolaus. Iolaus flashed Cheiron a quick look and then walked his best friend to the barracks. Cheiron watched the two of them, his face furrowed in thought.

There is something more at work here, the centaur mused. But Iolaus is well-equipped to handle the problem. If Hercules will let him.

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Hercules laced his fingers behind his head and leaned back in his bunk, drawing in a deep breath. Holding it for a second, he released it shakily, in an effort to relax himself. It didn't work. Swearing under his breath, he sat upright and leaned forward until his forehead rested on his knees.

" You're losing it, guy," he muttered to himself. Closing his eyes brought back the events that had transpired and watched the scene unfold in his head, piece by piece. Strife and Discord had shown up. No elaborate plan or scheme this time, just good old-fashioned mayhem. They had appeared in a burst of light, scattering the cadets in the midst of their morning drills, and launched fireballs in every direction. Lighting up the sky in a brilliant display of colors matching anything the Rainbow Goddess Iris could dish out, the fireballs also caused some big-league damage. Hercules opened his eyes and stared at the far wall, counting in his head. Three damaged walls, one obliterated well, and four cadets in the infirmary, including the Crown Prince of Corinth. " Good thing Iolaus had been at Kora's else he would've been a target too."

" Target for what?" Ioluas appeared in the doorway, with some bandages in one hand, and a bucket of water in the other.

" Nothing." Hercules pressed his fingers to his temples, hissing as his aching arms protested at the movement, slow as it was. Iolaus nodded.

" Okay big guy - time to become the Academy's official mascot mummy!" he said gleefully, holding the bandages up to Hercules face. Herc pushed them away.

" I'm fine Iolaus."

" Um, no. You're not," Iolaus corrected him as he tossed the cloth at his divine buddy and placed the bucket at his feet. " Clean those burns carefully - unless you want a sponge bath?" He waggled his eyebrows with exaggerated suggestiveness. Hercules stared at him, until finally a smile cracked his somber face and he accepted the cloth. Dampening it, he began to rid the wounds of dirt and various debris. Iolaus sat down to observe.

" So what would I have been a target for?" he asked after awhile. Herc looked up.

" What do you mean? Everyone was a target." He gave a slight yelp as he wiped one particularly nasty bruise a little too hard. Iolaus shook his head sadly.

" Why do I get the feeling you're lying to me?" he asked mournfully. Then he became serious. " Herc, why won't you talk to me?"

Hercules chose to avoid the question, and tossed the cloth back into the bucket. Reaching over, he snagged the bandages and began to wind them around his arms. Iolaus helped tie them off.

" You don't trust me?" Iolaus finally asked, a slight note of hurt entering his voice. Hercules raised his eyes.

" You know that's not even an issue," he said flatly. Iolaus shrugged.

" Then what's up?" he pressed.

Hercules stood up abruptly, causing Iolaus to yelp as his stool tipped back. Flailing his arms wildly, he and the stool fell to the floor.

" Warn me when you're gonna do that," he muttered as he rubbed his hip. Hercules extended his hand and pulled him up.

" Sorry."

" Answer the question."

" What do you want me to say?" Hercules finally snapped at him. He ran his fingers through his blond mop in agitation. Iolaus merely blinked at him, not impressed by the dramatics. He could sense that Hercules was trying to keep something from him, something that was eating him up. And if his behaviour from the last few days was any indication, it was something that had been festering for awhile. Iolaus found himself wishing that Herc would give in to the anger and go punch his hand through a wall or something, rather than let the rage build up. The problem with Herc is that he doesn't know how to vent properly, Iolaus decided. And if he thinks I'm gonna let him slide, then he's got another think coming!

" I want you to stop dancing around the issue. What. Is. Eating. You?" he said, drawing his words out slowly and clearly, as though Hercules were a dense child.

Suddenly, all the energy seemed to seep out of Hercules, and he sank down on the opposite bunk. " It's my fault," he mumbled quietly. " Everything that went down today, was my fault."

" How do you figure?" Iolaus punctuated that question with a puzzled look. Herc stared at the wall, eyes distant.

" Discord and Strife came specifically to hurt everyone but me today," he admitted, once again immersed in the memories of the day. " The only reason I got burned was because I tried to put out a fire near the stables." He rubbed his face tiredly. " They know they can't kill me, and so they were just passing time until they can come up with a new scheme to try and take me out without bringing the wrath of my father—" he spat the word out as though it had a foul taste. "—down on their heads!"

" Herc, you can't blame yourself because two dimwitted gods got bored and decided to cause trouble."

" Yes I can. They caused the trouble here." Herc suddenly looked right at Iolaus. Iolaus shuddered at the intense pain and guilt within. At least the mask is gone, he thought. Hercules continued. " If I hadn't been here, the Academy would still be in one piece. Do you know how many injuries there have been because of the gods, how many things we've had to repair, since I became a student here?" Iolaus didn't know what to say. " It would have been better if I'd never come here at all." Or ever been born, an inner voice told him accusingly. Iolaus stood up and looked at his half-mortal friend.

" That's bull, Herc, and you know it." He crouched down in front of

Hercules, trying to look him in the eyes. " You've done a lot of good since coming here, and besides, what would me and Jason do if you left? What would I do? You're my best friend!"

" And that automatically makes you a target!" Hercules shot back, and stood up. " Look, I need to go for a walk, do some thinking."

" Need some company?" Iolaus asked, hoping Hercules would say yes. But the demi-god shook his head.

" Thanks for the offer but I need some space. See ya later, okay?" With that, Hercules whirled around and stalked out of the barracks. Iolaus stood up and hesitated, debating whether or not to follow his stubborn friend. Finally he sighed, turned and picked up the discarded cloth and bucket, determined to knock some sense into Herc's head when he came back.

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" Oh this is too much! " Strife squealed in excitement. Discord smiled haughtily at him, agreeing.

" Poor baby brother," she sighed. Then her eyes lit up with fiendish glee. " We should pay him another visit tomorrow!"

" Good idea!" Strife snapped his fingers and a bowl of succulent fruit appeared before him. Snatching up a banana, he crammed the whole fruit into his mouth at once and struggled to chew. Discord watched him, disgust mingling with amusement on her pale features.

" Watching you eat is like watching a chariot wreck - disgusting and horrible, but at the same time, a source of entertainment," she mused as a crystal goblet appeared in her hand. Taking a sip of the golden liquid ambrosia, she watched as Strife succeeded in swallowing the banana before turning to her and sticking out his tongue. " Oh, that was mature."

About to answer, Strife was cut off by the flash of light that signaled the arrival of Ares, the God of War. The black-leather clad god strode over to them and with a single strike, had both of them pinned to the wall with twin beams of energy. Discord heaved a sarcastic sigh.

" Now what did we do?" she snapped in exasperation. Ares shook his head.

" Little sister," Ares purred in his silky smooth tone. " Normally I'd congratulate you on a job well done. I mean, you're driving Hercules crazy - that's bonus points for you."

" And me too!" whined Strife. He whimpered as Ares glared at him. Discord scowled.

" Then what, exactly, is your problem?" she asked, gesturing to the energy beams pinning them to the wall of his temple. Ares chuckled, a dark sound that made even Discord nervous.

" My problem is, your idea about doing this again tomorrow. And again, the next day. Do we see a pattern here?"

" I still don't know what's got your tunic in a twist," she growled. Ares let the energy dissipate and the two smaller gods hit the ground with a thunk. As they slowly got to their feet, Ares sighed. As usual, he'd have to explain everything.

" Have you forgotten the fact that all mortals, to some degree, are under the protection of Zeus?"

" No," said Strife. " But we were just having fun!" He snickered at the memory of the fleeing cadets. Ares nodded.

" Fun." One quick blow and Strife struck the wall again.

" Ow," he complained, getting back to his feet. Ares sighed again.

" When you continuously attack the same mortals over and over again, you're just asking to draw the attention of Zeus. And since his beloved son, my worthless half-brother goes to that Academy, the odds of him seeing what's going on, increases. Do you understand yet?"

" Oh please," snorted Discord. " It's not like we've killed anybody yet."

" Not for the lack of trying anyway," piped in Strife. This time, it was Discord who struck the annoying godling, flinging him head over heels. Ares looked vaguely amused, but then, his gaze hardened.

" Zeus won't be happy with you if you destroy the Academy for no reason. Especially if Hercules is put into danger. And he'll blame me by association. Though I could care less, because they need me around for balance, I'd rather not run the risk of being out back on trial. Especially because of you two. Again." He eyed them dangerously.

" But that protection order keeps him from danger," Strife objected. Then he paused. " Doesn't it?"

" Yes, half-wit," Ares snarled. " To a point. He can be hurt - heck, I've hurt him a few times myself. But I can't kill him."

" And therein lies the problem," purred Discord, lazily running her hands over the armrests of Ares throne. An idea struck her and her eyes flashed devilishly.

" What's on your mind, sis?" Ares asked, seeing the familiar, plotting expression on Discord's face. " Share with the class." His gentle tone hid the tint of command, but Discord heard it loud and clear.

" What if Hercules voluntarily gave up his protection order?" she asked. Ares grunted.

" And for a minute, I thought you grew a brain cell. It only gets renounced if Zeus himself decrees it open season on our dear brother. And he'll never do that to his coddled favourite!" Anger stormed across his face. Then just as suddenly, the storm abated and his eyes took on a crafty expression that Discord and Strife knew all to well.

" If Hercules gave up his protection order it wouldn't do much. But if he pledged his life to me, I'd be free to do what I want to him, short of killing him that is." Ares smiled evilly. Strife looked slightly confused, and he raised his hand tentatively. At Ares glare, he shrunk back into himself with a yip, but he still spoke cautiously.

" Why on earth would Hercules pledge his life to you? I mean, the guy hates ya - and who could blame him?" Strife suddenly chuckled at the thought. " I mean, he'd have to be a complete idiot to-"

" That's enough!" Ares roared, backhanding Strife. The godling flew through the air and landed in Discord's lap on Ares throne. Then Ares shrugged, straightening his black leathers. " But you raise a good point. How to get Hercules to swear allegiance to me..."

Discord let out a peal of laughter and stood up, unceremoniously dumping Strife to the floor. " By letting me and Strife do what we planned!"

Ares looked at her. " You've got my attention, sis."

" It's so simple!" she insisted. " Hercules will do anything to spare the live of his friends. So we make him a deal - he becomes your willing slave, and in exchange..."

"..we promise to leave his little friends alone!" Ares finished with a chuckle. He eyed his sister appreciatively. " You know, sometimes it's worth the aggravation, keeping you two around."

The three gods began to laugh as their plan began to take shape and grow before them.

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" Jason!" Iolaus clapped his friend on the back lightly. " Good to see you on your feet. Sort of. What is that?" He pointed at the strange walking stick Jason seemed to have wedged underneath his arm. Jason looked at it.

" Huh? Oh that - Cheiron made it for me, to help me walk. The little armrest here makes it more comfortable. He calls it a crutch."

" A crutch, huh?" Iolaus eyed the deformed walking stick. " Well, you know those crazy centaurs."

" Ha! Hey - have you seen Hercules?" Jason scratched his head absently. " I haven't seen him since you dropped me off and left me in the hands of Feducious." He shot Iolaus a dangerous look. " Thanks, by the way."

" Hey, Feducious IS a healer you know," Iolaus chuckled. " I'm just glad it was you, and not me!"

" I'll bet."

" I haven't seen Hercules," Iolaus continued, abruptly changing the subject before Jaosn could carry on. " I tried to talk to him earlier but he's got himself in a funk and left for a walk. I haven't seen him since."

" Funk? And you call centaurs crazy...."" Jason grinned as he shifted his weight slightly. Then his face grew a little more serious. " He hasn't come back yet?"

" No." Iolaus stopped smiling and raked a hand through his mop of tangled curls in a rare display of uncertainty. " He wouldn't admit that what happened wasn't his fault."

" Well, you know how he is Iolaus," Jason objected, a faint frown on his face. " He probably just needs to let off some steam. He'll be all right."

" Will he?" Iolaus asked him, head quirked to the side. " I don't think Herc knows how to let off steam. He's wound tighter than lacings on quarter staffs."

Jason smothered a laugh that threatened to erupt at the analogy. " True."

" Hey - you don't think he'll do something stupid, do you? Challenge Ares or something? " Iolaus suddenly asked, worry tinting his voice. Jason shook his head.

" Nah. He's too smart for that." Stifling a yawn, Jason blinked sleepily. " Look, I'm gonna turn in early tonight."

" You go ahead. With your crutch!" Iolaus giggled at the weird device once more before turning around. Jason stopped him with a look.

" Where are you going?"

" Here and there," he gestured vaguely. Under Jason's pointed stare, he wilted and admitted sheepishly, " I'm gonna see if I can find Herc and knock some sense into him. Geez, you've got that I'm-the-King stare down pat, don't you?"

" Part of the job my friend!" Jason chuckled before waving him off. " Go bring him back, Iolaus. If anyone can find him, you can."

" Yeah," Iolaus agreed. " Besides, with his tracking skills, Herc's probably lost in the woods by now, waiting for us - or should I say ME - to come to his rescue!"

A final clasp of hands in a warrior's handshake, and Iolaus set off into the woods, the twilight fading away from scarlet reds and brilliant yellows, to the dusky purple's and blues of the night.

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" Can't you do ANYTHING right?" Hercules seethed at himself, clenching his fists angrily. He closed his eyes tightly, and took a deep breath, trying to calm the rage that was coursing through him. He's never felt so frustrated and isolated before. Knowing that what had happened at the academy was his fault had caused a wellspring of guilt to form in the pit of his stomach and seeing Jason battered and bruised hadn't helped. And now, he was LOST! Hercules didn't know whether to laugh or bang his head against the nearest rock. He wanted to scream, he wanted to cry. He wanted to berate himself for getting lost when the last thing the Academy needed to do was send out a

search party. He wanted to apologize to Iolaus for sounding like such a jerk. He wanted to curse his father for protecting him, and at the same time he wanted to thank his father for keeping Ares and his little followers from being able to kill him. Then guilt for knowing that he was spared and the others were at risk, nearly choked him.

Crouching down, he tugged mutely at his hair, fingers entwining the golden tendrils in an attempt to try and sort out his feelings. Memories assaulted him and the backlash of so much anger and guilt overwhelmed in such a brutal fashion that he screamed and lashed out, letting his fist fly into the boulder next to him. A sickening crack met his ears and when he opened his eyes, a pile of fine dust was all that remained. He stared at it in wonder for a moment, flexing his fingers gingerly.

" That hurt," he said, so-matter-of-factly that he had to laugh, a shrill noise that didn't sound natural. But it had felt good to finally release some of the pent up emotion and he found that while he still had the rage within him, he felt a little calmer. He now understood why Iolaus was always telling him to break things when he was upset. Suddenly, the sound of applause reached his ears and he whirled around, automatically falling into a defensive crouch. His eyes widened when he saw who it was.

" Ares," he breathed, hatred igniting his brown eyes with fire. " What are you doing here?"

" Just watching you, little bro!" Ares chuckled in a low tone. He stooped next to where the doomed boulder had once rested and sifted his hand through the gravel, whistling appreciatively. " Nice job."

" What do you want?" Hercules asked, his voice hard and cold. The God of War straightened and casually dusted his hands on his leather tunic.

" You."

" Huh?" Hercules stepped back. Ares laughed again.

" Oh come on bro - we're family! Lighten up!" His eyes flashed dangerously. " I'd hate to have to resort to violence during a family meeting."

" I'm not afraid of you Ares," Hercules snarled, fighting to keep from attacking Ares right then and there.

" Oh I know you aren't, little brother," Ares agreed with him. " But what about your friends at that little Academy?"

Ares words knifed through Hercules's heart, freezing him where he stood. Ares grinned.

" Ooh, that did it!" Another laugh. " I mean, seriously - what's to keep me from just incinerating the whole place, just to spite you?"

" You stay away from them, Ares!" Hercules growled, rage creeping into his voice. His knuckles white, he took a step forward, fists

clenched. " Your fight is with me!"

" Oh I know that. But daddy's little protection order keeps me from having any fun," Ares said, curling his mouth into a mocking pout.

" I fight my own battles."

" No, you don't. Dear old dad does." Ares stopped for a second. " Try saying that three times fast!"

" Then what do you want?" Hercules asked, suddenly sounding defeated. Ares smiled, a sinister display devoid of any emotion, save hatred.

" I want you," Ares said flatly. " I want you to be my willing slave. I may not be able to kill you, but heck, I'll still get to have my fun. And in return, you get my solemn vow that I'll leave your precious Academy alone."

Hercules was silent for a moment. " If you want to hurt me, why go to all this trouble?" He finally asked, confused. " Why do you want me to come with you?"

" If you are my willing slave, agreeable to whatever I say, then Zeus cannot interfere, no matter what." Ares eyes lit up at the thought of torturing his meddlesome half-brother. " I just can't kill you."

Again, time dragged its feet as Hercules considered Ares words. Then he looked up, pale-faced but determined. " How do I know you'll keep your word not to harm the Academy?"

" I swear by Zeus and Hera - the Academey is safe from harm by me or my followers, so long as you remain my prisoner." A bolt of lightening from his hand struck the sky at his words, splitting the night air with a resounding clap of thunder. He held out his hand to his brother, power coursing through him, a mocking smile playing about his lips. " Seal the deal, bro."

Hercules raised his hand slowly to take the War God's. Just as his fingers touched the swirling energy, a panicked shout burst free from the woods, and Iolaus, battered and windblown, erupted into the clearing.

" No! Hercules, DON'T!"

Whatever answer Hercules was going to shout, was drowned out by the roaring winds. Just as he felt himself vanish with the God of War, his calm eyes met the frantic gaze of his friend's and he mouthed, I'm sorry. Then darkness swept over him, and he felt himself fall headfirst into oblivion.

## 2. Default Chapter Title

### TEST OF A FRIENDSHIP PART 2

DISCLAIMER: I want to own Ares. Dean O'Gorman can come home with me. Stormy had better wake up. \*sigh\* I don't own anything. How

depressing. \*sob\*

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Iolaus waded his way through the dense underbrush, carefully avoiding the branches that swung in his way. He mumbled a curse under his breath as he studied the ground beneath the moonlight, his keen senses and highly trained eyes picking out the signs of passage from his friend.

" I could be home in my bed," he groused. But his words didn't match the concern in his eyes. He'd been tracking his headstrong friend for a while now, and was a bit concerned that he hadn't found him yet. Even if Iolaus hadn't been the best tracker at the Academy, Hercules had left a trail a blind man could follow. He tread softly along the path, his careful movements silent as the night itself as he paused, considered some snapped-off branches and chuckled to himself. " Real subtle, big guy."

Still, for all his levity, Iolaus was truly worried about Hercules. The young blond knew that Hercules tended to cut himself off from everyone when he was hurt or troubled. 'Don't want to worry anyone', were his words. Iolaus tossed his hair back as he continued. Every hunter knew that a wounded animal was dangerous. A cornered, wounded animal even more so. Iolaus debated how to approach Hercules when he found him.

" A wrong move and he could just backhand me to Olympus!" But Iolaus doubted Hercules would seriously hurt him. I actually wish he would. Good way to let it out of your system. Then he thought about it. And put me in the infirmary. Okay, hurt something else! But no, it was more likely Hercules would shore up his defenses and tell him he was fine. Iolaus snorted. Yeah right. He gingerly picked his way past a thornbush and was about to push through the hedges in front of him when he heard a scream.

" Hercules!" Iolaus parted the bushes and peered through, stopping short as Hercules struck a boulder next to him with such force, it shattered and settled to the earth in a powdery gravel form. Now THAT was power. " Yikes." Now what to do? He decided to go for it and opened his mouth to call out to his friend, quietly so's not to startle him. Before his mouth could form the words though, an invisible force slapped over his mouth, cutting off all sound. He couldn't even grunt and he struck out with his arms and legs, trying to rattle the underbrush to alert his friend. But his limbs refused to obey him and he was slowly lifted into the air. Eyes wide and scared, he tried to move his head to see who had captured him, and was taken by surprise when a sickly pale face appeared directly in his. Iolaus would have gasped if he were able.

Strife! He should have known. The weird little god laughed at him, a sound akin to one's sharpening of the nails on slate stone.

" Look, Discord, it's little Iolaus!" He giggled insanely as the sultry Discord materialized next to Strife. She gazed at him, one lip turned up in an evil half-smile.

" Now, you weren't thinking of spoiling the party now, were you?" she purred, caressing the side of his face. Iolaus flinched at her touch, and his eyes shot daggers at her. She laughed. " Oh relax

blondie - we're not gonna hurt you."

Iolaus eye's must have carried his disbelief, because Strife jumped in, nodding his head excitedly.

" Yeah, we're not allowed to any more." Strife motioned Iolaus forward and the invisible force carrying him, brought him closer to the thicket. Strife then pointed. " See?"

Iolaus looked. Hercules was standing, arms at the ready, a tall man dressed in black leather standing before him. Ares! He shouted within his mind, and he strained against his invisible bonds. His corded muscles tensed and he flexed, wiggling slightly, trying to break free. Finally, he slumped a little, worn out. Strife let out yet another giggle.

" Oh, knock it off - you honestly think you're going to get free?" He snorted. " Puh-leaze!"

" And besides," Discord chimed in. " If you did, you'd miss out on what's going on. You'll be happy to know that we won't be pestering the Academy anymore." As Strife had done, she pointed at Hercules. " We'll be picking on HIM!"

Suddenly, Iolaus could now hear the conversation going on between god and demi-god.

" How do I know you'll keep your word not to harm the Academy?" he heard Hercules ask in a defeated tone. Iolaus watched as Ares lit up the sky at that, and he strained to hear the answer. Amidst all the crackling thunder, Iolaus could barely make out Ares telling Hercules to become his prisoner. The winds swept through the clearing and tousled his hair, whipping in his face. Iolaus blinked furiously, trying to see through the mailstrom. Prisoner? The Academy for Herc? His eyes widened as his mind filled in the blanks. No! He watched as Hercules seemed to resign himself and reach out his hand. Strife and Discord cast significant looks at one another before releasing their hold on the blond hunter. As they vanished, Iolaus dropped to the ground and rolled to his feet, swaying slightly as he regained his equilibrium. Then he burst through the hedges in a panic.

" No! Hercules, don't!" he screamed, ignoring the scratches the thorns from the brush left on his arms. The winds pushed him back as he tried to reach his friend and he looked up, catching Hercule's eye. He gasped at the pain and sorrow in his friend's face, the guilt that was so evident. And as he watched, he saw Hercules mouth form an apology before vanishing. The winds died down and the night sky cleared as all traces of his friend were erased, Ares evil laughter left echoing on his ears. He fell to the ground disoriented, terror streaking across his face.

" HERCULES!"

\* \* \*

" There was nothing you could have done," said Cheiron as he bandaged another scratch. Iolaus winced at the ointment's painful sting but said nothing. Cheiron studied his student carefully. When Iolaus had stumbled through the Academy gates without Hercules, Cheiron had

assumed that the demi-god had brushed off all of Iolaus's attempts to talk. Upon seeing the scratches though, he knew something had happened and had gotten Iolaus to confess. He continued. " Hercules felt he knew what was best for the Academy."

" So you think he did the right thing?!" Iolaus asked in disbelief. " Ouch!"

" No. But he obviously felt that he did," Cheiron said dabbing another cut. " He believes that it is his fault that the gods continue to plague the Academy. And it is inherent in Hercule's nature to help others."

" So he decided to make a trade." Iolaus fell silent for a moment, thinking. You big dope, he seethed. Why did you trade away your freedom? Then a thought struck him.

" But it's okay, right? I mean, Ares can't do anything to him, can he? Not while Herc has Zeus's protection!"

" Maybe," Cheiron allowed. But the centaur knew that Ares wouldn't have offered such a trade unless he knew it would benefit him in some way. He didn't want to burst the little bubble of joy Iolaus felt in thinking his friend was safe from harm. Then he saw Iolaus's face darken. " What is wrong?"

" He may not kill Herc," Iolaus said quietly. " But you'd be surprised what you can live through." He fingered an old scar near his ribs as he spoke. Cheiron's eyes widened, and he felt a faint stirring of alarm.

" I hadn't looked at the situation that way," he admitted. " But regardless, there's very little we can do. I cannot in good conscience send my cadets after a god, and I doubt Ares would be willing to listen to reason."

" There's got to be a way," Iolaus insisted, mind racing over possible scenarios. Cheiron smiled sadly at him and left to put the medical equipment away and to tend to the other students still in the infirmary.

Time passed, and still Iolaus was no closer to a solution than before. Jason tried to convince the young hunter to come to the dining hall for dinner, and at his words, Iolaus's eyes lit up.

" That's it!" he breathed. Jason cocked his head at him.

" Huh?"

" I'll explain later!" Iolaus flashed out of the room before Jason could say another word.

" Weird," the Crown Prince muttered, but as his eyes fell on Hercules's empty bunk, he looked back to where Iolaus had left. " But I hope it works, Iolaus. Bring our friend home."

\* \* \*

Hercules stumbled as he rematerialized inside Ares temple on Mount Olympus. With a snort of laughter the God of War planted a boot into

his back and sent him reeling. Hercules winced and turned around, warily picking himself off the ground. He didn't like the look he saw in Ares eyes. Momentarily, he thought of Iolaus with a pang of regret - too bad he couldn't have explained. But he had 'sealed the deal' as it were and it was too late now.

" So now what?" he challenged. Ares eyes narrowed and a sinister smile crept over his face.

" Now, my dear brother - the fun begins." As he spoke, four strips of metal floated into the air. Hercules barely had time to recognize them as restraints forged by Hephaestus before they locked around his wrists, flinging him up against the temple wall. The back of his head struck the stone and he blacked out. Ares shook his head.

" Oh no, little brother, you don't get out of it THAT easily!" A wave of his hand and a bucket of ice water splashed over the demi-god, snapping him awake with a cry. Ares smiled at the sound. " I want you awake." He strode over and slammed his fist into Hercules's stomach. Hercules tried to double over but the chains kept him in place and he could only gasp in pain. Cracked ribs for sure. Ares cracked his knuckles.

" This is gonna be sweet."

\* \* \*

Iolaus raced through the woods as fast as he could go, dodging tree limbs and uprooted stumps sure-footedly. Ahead of him, he could see Kora's Tavern and he pushed himself to go faster. Every minute Herc is stuck with that madman, is another minute of trouble! Kora's place drew closer and he smiled slightly at the reason why he was headed there.

Mentally he thanked Hercules for telling him of his last little adventure in Corinth. Hercules had gone to compete in an archery contest and had been beaten by a red-clad warrior. As it turned out, the red warrior was none other than Kora, who needed the prize, the Bow of Artemis, to return to her patron goddess in exchange for her freedom from Artemis's service. Unfortunately, after gaining her freedom, Strife and his boys attacked Hercules who had followed Kora to help her, and Kora ended up back in the service of Artemis so she could save Herc's life. Iolaus shook his head. Tough break. But if Kora was able to call on Artemis, maybe she could help him find a way to help Hercules. Reaching the double doors of the Tavern, Iolaus strode inside and marched straight up to the counter. Kora turned at the sound of his arrival, expecting a new customer. Seeing Iolaus, a half-smile graced her lips.

" What are you doing here? You don't work until tomorrow. And there's no overtime!" she added as an afterthought. Iolaus shook his head.

" I need to talk to you Kora. Now. It's about Hercules."

Kora's eyes held a touch of concern. She called one of her waiters over and told him to take over the counter for her.

" And don't add the tips to the total!" she called out as she led Iolaus around back, where they could talk in privacy. Once Iolaus was

in, she closed the door and settled herself on a nearby chair. " So what's up?"

" Are you still a servant of Artemis?" Iolaus came straight to the point. Kora leaped out of her chair, eyes flashing dangerously.

" How did you know that?? I thought Hercules said I could trust him!" she spat out, her anger masking her intense hurt over the fact that Hercules would break her confidence. Iolaus held up his hands.

" Whoa Kora - Herc only told me because we never know what information may come in handy in the future."

" You mean blackmail!" Kora snapped.

" I mean help!" Iolaus stood up and faced her, anger matching hers. " And it's a good thing he did, 'cause he needs help now!"

Kora swallowed her next outburst and crossed her arms, unwilling to forgive and forget. " What do you mean, he needs help? You guys are the ones in the Academy, training to become warriors! What do you want with me?"

" The Academy is part of the reason Herc's in trouble! Will you let me explain?!" Iolaus shouted at her, and Kora stepped back in surprise. Iolaus never yelled at her before. Something IS wrong, she realized, and she reached out with one hand, entreatingly.

" Okay, Iolaus, calm down. What do you want from me?"

Iolaus sat back, slightly mollified. " I need to contact Artemis."

" Why?"

" Can you do it?"

" Not without a good reason, Iolaus! She doesn't just come on command you know!" Kora threw up her hands in frustration. Iolaus nodded resignedly.

" You heard about the attack on the Academy the other day?"

" Yeah," Kora said searching her memory. " A cadet, I think, came by and mentioned something about Strife."

" That's it," said Iolaus. " Well, Herc blamed himself - AGAIN - and he made a deal with Ares."

" Ares?" Kora asked, shocked.

" Yeah. Ares agreed that he, Strife, and Discord will leave the Academy alone as long as Herc becomes their prisoner. Willingly."

" And Hercules agreed to that?"

" You know the big guy," Iolaus sighed. " That self-sacrificing act has really gotta go."

Kora thought for a moment, debating whether or not she really wanted

to go more into debt with the Goddess of the Hunt. As a follower of Artemis, she was limited in her relationships and at the beck and call of her goddess. Asking Artemis for favours generally resulted in her owing big. Iolaus saw her hesitating.

" Come on Kora!" he pleaded. " We can't just let Ares kill Herc!"

Maybe she'll be lenient when she finds out it's for her brother,, Kora thought resignedly, smothering a sigh. She turned aside and raised her arms.

" Artemis! Kora, your faithful servant, needs your help!" she said in a loud clear voice. Iolaus glanced around anxiously.

" Where is she?" he muttered. A silvery laugh answered him and he whirled about to see a beautiful woman in Amazon clothing standing before them. Her long hair swirled down around her waist. Trim and toned muscles peeked out from the daringly cut tunic that emphasized freedom of movement. Flashing silver eyes bored into him, until Iolaus felt she could see into the depths of his very soul. He swallowed nervously.

" Um, hey. You must be Artemis," he said weakly. Kora stifled a groan, and Artemis smiled bemusedly.

" And you are Iolaus, my golden hunter!" she said, casually flicking a strand of hair away from his face. Iolaus nodded. " And why do you call on me?" She leaned forwards. " I do not make it a habit to appear on command."

Iolaus glanced at Kora, noting the similar speech, and then shrugged, dismissing it. " I need your help. It's about your brother, Hercules."

" Half-brother," Artemis said, but she waved him on.

Iolaus explained the situation, starting with the funk the demi-god had been in, going on to describe the attack by Strife and Discord, and finished up with the deal Hercules had made Ares to protect the Academy. Artemis listened silently throughout the long-winded explanation, her dark eyes narrowing at the mention of her brother Ares.

" Ares will seek to destroy Hercules," she predicted ominously. Iolaus rolled his eyes.

" I KNOW that," he said waspishly. Kora raised her eyebrows in alarm at his tone of voice but Iolaus was sick and tired of waiting around, and having Artemis voice what he already knew wasn't helping. " How can I get him out of there? And keep the Academy safe?"

Artemis smiled inwardly. Deep in her immortal heart, she had a fondness for her half-mortal brother, and subsequently, his friend Iolaus. Her golden hunter. She had seen a glimpse of their future, destined to become the greatest hero's of Greece, their lives so intertwined that not even death would part them for long. She allowed a part of her fondness seep into her expression and both Kora and Iolaus relaxed a bit.

" If you perform a service of great importance to me, I will grant you passage to Ares sacred temple at the base of Mount Olympus where you will find your friend. And if you serve me well, I shall place my protection on the Academy, so that none may be killed by another god." she said gently.

" Kinda like Herc's deal with Zeus. And we all know how well that works!" Kora exclaimed. Artemis shook her head.

" Gods may still try and destroy your school - Hercules's dealings with Ares are proof enough of that. But at least, none shall be killed so long as I am there to protect it."

Iolaus nodded; that was what he needed to hear. " I'm guessing you already have my task in mind?"

Artemis laughed. " I do indeed." A wave of her hand and an image of a beautiful golden eagle appeared before them. Golden feathers glinted in the sunlight, cresting off it's bronzed head. It was large, larger then any bird Iolaus had ever seen before, with a wing span of nearly ten feet. White encircled its slender throat and the whole creature was of exquisite proportion. It was the most beautiful sight either the young cadet or the tavern owner had ever seen.

" Wow," Iolaus breathed. Artemis nodded.

" That is my pride and joy. His name is Kalik." Her smile vanished. " Apollo has hidden him away from my realm of the forest, and I am unable to return him to the wild."

" Let me guess," Iolaus said sarcastically. " You want me to take on Apollo and get your bird back."

" In a matter of speaking, yes." Artemis motioned for Kora to step forward. " You, Kora, with the power of the Huntress, will be Iolaus's guide. You will help him in this mission. In exchange," the goddess smiled at her follower. "...I will release you from your vows to me."

Kora was filled with disbelief. Her freedom? No more serving the will of Artemis? To be her own person, to love, like she had once told Hercules she'd like to experience with someone, someday?

" When do we start?"

\* \* \*

To the general observer, Ares temple was both awe-inspiring, and intimidating. The sheer size of it against the Mount Olympus backdrop, caught hold of your attention and refused to let go. Tall pillars of dark, polished marble, spiraled and twisted their way up to the roof of the front pavillion-style entrance, and were surrounded by intricately carved statues of past warlords and evil creatures. The massive doors were of solid oak, as ornately designed as the columns. Two razor-sharp broadswords were bolted to the door, crossed as though in battle, and a sentry stood on either side, war-worn faces solemn and loyal in their duties. Inside the doors was the main room, where Ares priests made their offerings to the God of War. Ares likeness was displayed in the many icons and statues decorating the room. On the far wall, behind the stone altar, a

life-size fresco depicted Ares in one of his moments of glory on the battlefield, his warlords triumphant behind him, the dead carcass's of their enemies at his feet. The disciples of Ares tended to his temple, and arranged the tributes paid by his followers. Simple tasks, but ones they performed unerringly, else they would pay the price.

A door slammed shut, and they all jerked their heads up in fright. The head priest entered the room and they all breathed a soft sigh of relief before returning to their work. Sparing them all a glance, the priest made his way to the altar and repeated his vows to the God of War, desperately trying to ignore the screams of pain coming from the dungeon below the temple.

\* \* \*

Hercules was in Tartarus. Blinking the sweat out of his eyes, he gasped for breath, each inhalation drawing a whimper of pain from him as his broken ribs protested the movement. The iron restraints cut into his wrists and ribbons of blood streamed down his torso. His whole body ached, ached in places he didn't even know existed. But he lifted his head up and stared across the room, and in defiance he spat at his tormentors. " I-is...that..the..b-best you c...can do?" he gasped painfully, struggling to breath normally. Discord burst into a high-pitched giggle of laughter, while next to her, Strife glared at Hercules as he used an old cloth to wipe the saliva from his tunic. " You'll pay for that, little man," Strife hissed and launched another energy ball. The lightning and energy coursed through Hercules's body and he screamed in agony, his every nerve and synapse on fire. His voice cut out and he trembled violently, the hair on his arms crackling with a blue-violet energy. Finally, the barrage ceased and he sagged back against the wall, only the metal cuffs keeping him up. His head bowed, and his eyes closed, Hercules conjured up an image of the Academy. In his mind, he saw the cadets safe from harm, and that knowledge gave him back a bit of his spirit. He raised his eyes to Strife and waited to see what the godling would do. Discord could read the fear in his eyes, and she smiled sweetly at him.

" Oh don't worry, Hercules, " she purred languidly. " It's my turn now." Sauntering up to the demi-god, she gently caressed his face before reaching back and delivering a stinging slap. Hercules's head jerked to the side and he could taste the coppery tang of blood in his mouth. He saw the goddess through a hazy fog, and saw her pick up a long, slim object. His eyes widened and he whimpered in fear. Discord turned back to face him, trailing the whip through her fingers. She snapped it once, against the hard stone of the ground, listening to the crack it made. " And I like to play!" Hercules closed his eyes and waited for the leather to cut into his skin. He wasn't disappointed.

\* \* \*

Ares materialized inside his temple, fresh from a war and in generally good spirits. The sounds and sights of war did wonders for his moral. Walking up to his altar, he noticed the new offerings and plucked a grape from the cluster, popping it into his mouth as he motioned for his priest to step forward. " How do things fare at my temple?" he asked. The priest swallowed nervously as he knelt before his god and said, " Business as usual, Ares. But..uh.." As the priest

trailed off, Ares gave a sigh of impatience and gestured for him to continue.

" ...uh, some of your followers have been wondering about the noise coming from the dungeon. While you were gone, there was a lot of noise coming from it. But—" the priest hastily added. "-none of us dared enter your private inner sanctum my lord."

" Very wise," Ares said, smiling evilly. " I'd hate to have to kill you. As it is, your curiosity is not helping to increase your life span." The priest turned white. " Still," Ares continued. " You serve me well, and I forgive you your nosiness - this time." He stretched, and turned to go down to the dungeon. Suddenly he turned back. " What kinds of noises?"

" I believe we heard your nephew, the god Strife, and your sister, the goddess Discord," stuttered the priest. Ares scowled and vanished, leaving the priest to sink to his knees in relief. He appeared in his custom-made torture room and took in the scene. Strife lounged nearby on a pile of his best satin cushions. His eyes narrowed even further as he saw the god's mud-clad boots propped up on his chair. He then turned and took in the laughing Discord as she brandished her favourite whip in one hand. Finally, he saw his half-brother Hercules, dangling from the metal cuffs, unconscious and bathed in blood. Strife and Discord saw Ares and the laughter cut off immediately. Ares stepped forward and blasted Strife.

" You got mud on my cushions!" he snarled. Turning to Discord, he watched her shrink back a bit in fear and he smiled as he gestured to Hercules. " Having fun?"

" Mmmm-hmm!" she murmured as she stroked the leather whip. " The best kind."

Ares walked up to where his brother was strung up, and studied the fruits of her labours. Hercules bathed shallowly, and he was as pale as a ghost. Deep slashes cut into his skin, courtesy of Discord's whip and blood ran in rivulets down his body, dripping off the lax fingers, pooling beneath his feet. Dark bruises dotted his skin and there was a faint stench of burnt flesh lingering in the air.

" Energy balls, Strife?" Ares asked the godling. " Isn't that a bit of overkill?"

" No," the god said righteously. " It's not ENOUGH kill."

" Have you forgotten something, my dim-witted little nephew?" Ares asked rhetorically. Eyes blazing, he leaned in close. " You can't kill him!" He glanced back Hercules, and he felt a very faint twinge at the destruction the two lesser gods had wrought. Then he shook himself, and banished it from his mind. It had just been a long day.  
" I'm going to go relax. Don't bother me."

" Don't you want to have your turn?" Discord asked, holding the whip out. Ares looked at the whip and then at his half-brother. Hercules slowly opened one eye and stared dazedly at him, pain and terror filling his face. That twinge gnawed at him again, and he turned away.

" Not right now. I've had a long war today." And he vanished. Then he

reappeared. " And that's enough for you too. There'll be plenty of time to torture him tomorrow." And he was gone again. Strife pouted and Discord sighed as she hung the whip back up on the wall. Blowing Hercules a kiss, she disappeared in a flash of blue light, Strife right on her heels. Hercules head was fuzzy but he could have sworn Ares had shown him a hint of sympathy. Can't be right, he thought dizzily. And then the welcoming darkness that had lingered on the outer edge of his vision, embraced him and carried him away.

\* \* \*

" Kora?" " Yes Iolaus?" " When we find Hercules..."

" Yeah?"

" Remind me to kick his butt for this!" Iolaus grumbled as he strained to reach a rocky outcropping above his head. Securing his hold on the rocks he pulled himself up and looked back to see if Kora needed assistance. The young tavern owner gave him a brief smile but shook her head, reaching for the ledge he had just vacated.

" I got it," she said, puffing slightly. Iolaus nodded and turned back, reaching up again. After talking with Artemis, she had transported them to the base of the Mount Evenet, upon whose peaks, Apollo had his primary temple. Iolaus remembered the dizzying way he had felt taken apart and reassembled into a thousand sparks of shimmering light. That was before, of course, he had fallen headfirst to the ground, unused to such a method of transportation. Kora, much to his chagrin (and embarrassment) and landed nimbly without suffering the same dizzying effects. Artemis had then vanished, leaving them to their mission. Iolaus felt the familiar annoyance creeping over him that always seemed to appear when Hercule's divine relatives showed up. Sucking in another breath of the rapidly thinning air, Iolaus grabbed another ledge, digging his fingers in hard.

" Would it have been so hard to put us on TOP of the cliff before she did her disappearing act?" he muttered. Below him, Kora giggled.

" She can't do that!" Kora admonished him. She stretched her leg to a ridge beside her to help keep her balance, looking for the next handhold, before continuing.

" First of all, it'd be too much interference on her part, and second: this is Apollo's HOME. Petitioners desperate enough to come here, have to make it on their own."

" Yeah, yeah," Iolaus said wryly, wincing as a particularly sharp stone cut into his palm. " Ouch!"

The two mountaineers continued their trek, helping each other over the rough spots before coming to a long ledge, about twice as long as Iolaus and about as wide as he and Kora lying head to foot. Small rocks littered the surface and a few sparse patches of pale grass sprouted up in clumps here and there. Iolaus threw a look at Kora, about to suggest they press on when he saw the tiredness in her face. His own limbs, he realized, were shaking with fatigue too. Kora saw the indecisive look on his face.

" Iolaus? Let's camp here for the night," she said, dropping her pack

on the ground. " We won't accomplish much if we're too tired when we reach the top."

Iolaus sighed, and reluctantly let his own pack slip out of his grasp. " You're right," he said slowly, before raising his eyes back to the cliffs peak. Kora lay a surprisingly gentle hand on his arm.

" He'll be all right," she insisted quietly. " Hercules can handle himself."

" I know," Iolaus agreed. It's his relatives handling him that I'm worried about. Tearing his eyes from the mountain top, he gave her a weary smile. " So what did you bring to eat?"

Listening to Kora squawk at him hinting that he'd only brought her along so that he could get a free meal from her, Iolaus felt a grin tugging at the corner of his lips. But before he turned to the repast Kora was laying out, he looked up at the night sky, with the bright lights of the stars dusted across the vast canopy of darkness. Be careful Herc. We're coming.

\* \* \*

### 3. Default Chapter Title

TEST OF A FRIENDSHIP PART 3

DISCLAIMER:

Stormy: I don't own them.

Iolaus: But you wish you did!

Stormy: 'Course I do! I'd be rich!

Iolaus: \*shakes head\* No you wouldn't - we got cancelled, remember?

Stormy: Oh right!

\* \* \*

Ares appeared in his private chambers in a flash of lightning, and strode over to a mirror. Conjuring a mug of ale to his hand, he downed part of it while gesturing to the mirror.

" Show me the prisoner," he snarled, roughly wiping the foam from his lips. The reflection in the mirror, changed from that of the God of War, to that of his torture chamber in a swirl of mist. Hercules battered body hung limply from the restraints. Ares growled and banished the image from the mirror with a wave of his hand. This was NOT working out like he had planned. Sure, maiming and torturing were loads of fun - he'd be the first to admit that. Enjoying the simple pains of life were a prerequisite for his line of work. But balance meant everything. There was a reason and a result of everything he did on the battlefield. He refilled his mug with more of the divine ale as he thought. While others may not agree, war served a purpose. Indeed, a very important purpose.

To start a war between two countries, to mortals, was nothing but death. A waste of time, resources, and human lives. But it also served to keep people in line. To cull the herd, so to speak, and to keep people in control of their emotions. His job was very important, and, Ares thought smugly, he was very good at his job. But this....he brought forth the image of his abused half-brother. He had always dreamed of killing Hercules. Still would, if he thought he could get away with it. But torture? What purpose did it serve? Ares mulled that over for a minute. To make him feel better? Did it really? Then it would be him doing the torturing. But so far, it had been all Strife and Discord's show. So if he was against this treatment, why did he start it to begin with? To be truthful, chaining him up just to gloat at him, and make him serve him against his will, well, that had been the original idea that he had fallen for. But his two godlings seemed to have their black hearts set on doing everything they could, short of killing the demi-god. Now that Ares realized what was wrong with the picture, what exactly could he do about it? Setting the mug down, he created another window and kept an eye on a skirmish he had put into play that day while still pondering his dilemma. And once Zeus catches wind of what's going down, I KNOW I'm gonna be in trouble. Not that Zeus could actually do anything - Hercules HAD come of his own free will. Ares growled in frustration. Things would be so much simpler if he could just kill who he wanted and to Tartarus with the consequences. If he continued with the torture, Zeus would find a loophole and take away his godhood for sure. If he ignored what went down, then the blame could be placed solely at the feet of Strife and Discord, but he'd still have to explain why he allowed the abuse to happen in his temple. If he stopped everything, he'd be thought weak. And if he healed Hercules and just went back to the original plan of slavery, he'd have to protect his brother from Strife and Discord which kind of defeated the whole purpose of him proving his power to his half-god sibling. He dissipated the window and sighed. So what do I do?

\* \* \*

Pain. Blackness. Pain. Hercules moaned softly as he slowly regained consciousness. At first, all he was aware of was the intense pain all over his body. He felt the strain of his wrists as they were captured by the cuffs, and could feel the numbness in his hands. He fought valiently and won the war of opening one eye slowly. The world began to come into focus, the darkness ever present on the fringe of his vision. He swallowed thickly, trying in vain to summon the moisture to soothe his parched throat. As the room stopped spinning, he was able to determine that he was alone.

For now. Surely it wouldn't belong before his brother and his twisted relatives to return for some more fun. As if to remind him, his gaze fell on the whip that Discord had used so lovingly, and he shuddered, more from the fear that she would be back to use it again, then the pain of the memory. He shook his head slowly, feeling a stab of pain radiate throughout him, spiking at his head and ribs. As the spell passed, he began to focus on what he should do. Nothing, a voice told him. As long as I put up with this, my friends are safe. Friends. Hercules closed his eyes and summoned an image of the Academy. Cheiron. Teacher, mentor, benevolent and kind. Jason. Crown Prince, brave, loyal, a natural leader who offered his hand in friendship. Lillith. A fiesty, trusting, and tough cadet with dreams of becoming a warrior, despite the differences in gender. And Iolaus.

Hercules's head dropped in sorrow. What had it looked like to Iolaus, when Hercules had clasped Ares hand and disappeared. Would Iolaus think he had joined his evil brother? Would he believe he had been kidnapped? Would he....hate him?

Hercules could take the rejection of almost anyone at the Academy, except Iolaus. Iolaus had been his first real friend, the first person to treat him as an actual person and not a god, or a bastard, as the townspeople were wont to call him. When they had met, Hercules had helped the blond hunter defeat a local gang, and then had waited for the warrior to turn away in disgust. To his immense surprise and subsequent delight, Iolaus had become his friend, and had been the one to give him his nickname. Hercules smiled grimly. He would gladly hear that dreaded shortened version of his name, if it meant Iolaus would come bursting through the door, cadets in tow, to save his sorry hide. He wondered briefly if Iolaus would take his alliance with Ares as an abandonment of him. *Oh gods.* Iolaus had trouble trusting people, thanks to his 'relationship' with his father, general Skorous. But he had opened up to Hercules and his mother, Alcmene, and Hercules didn't want to lose the trust Iolaus had placed in him. Hercules considered Iolaus his brother, and knew the latter thought of him the same way. That had especially meant a lot to the shy demigod whose real brother, Iphicles, had left home a long time ago to escape the shame of being brother to the bastard son of the whore Alcmene.

Tears stung Hercules's eyes at the painful memories, and resolutely pushed them to the back of his mind into a box that he shut and mentally marked 'Do Not Open'. No. He shook his head, wincing again. Iolaus would understand. With that in mind, Hercules's determination to protect his friends resurfaced and he shifted his weight, trying to find some measure of comfort before closing his eyes to get a little more sleep before the torture began anew.

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Iolaus saw the light filtering in through his closed lids and turned over, trying to escape the bright beams. About to sink back to sleep, he suddenly remembered where he was and what he was doing there. He sat up abruptly, drawing the attention of the sleeping girl across from him. Kora blinked her eyes sleepily, and pushed the hair out of her eyes.

"Iolaus?" she asked, yawning. Iolaus turned to her and nodded good morning while gathering his sleeping roll. Kora groused about having to wake up so early, but she too began to pack up her things, pausing long enough to offer Iolaus some fruit from her food pouch for breakfast. Iolaus shook his head.

" Let's eat on the move. The hard part's done and there's a trail we can use," he said gesturing to the wall. Kora turned and peered up at the rock-strewn path that started on a small ledge about half a foot wide. She narrowed her eyes.

" THAT'S a path?" she asked skeptically. She had no idea how she intended to walk along THAT without holding on to the wall for dear life, much less eating along the way. Iolaus chuckled.

" It would be a path to you too, if you'd turn into that Huntress person," he pointed out. Kora sighed impatiently.

" I told you, we'll need it once we get there to sneak in, and so Kalik recognizes us as followers of Artemis. I can't waste that power just climbing the cliffs - I won't be able to summon it later!"

" It wears you out, or something?" Iolaus asked, giving her a hand onto the ledge.

" Something like that," Kora straightened. " Lead on, Golden Hunter."

Iolaus blushed at the use of Artemis's pet name for him. " Better than Sweetcheeks," he muttered. Kora snorted at that.

" Where'd you get that?"

" Let's just say of the few female relatives Herc has that aren't trying to kill us, Aphrodite is the most...friendly...of them all," he said, trying to keep from laughing. Kora just shook her head and gave him a light push forward. After twenty minutes of tediously picking their way up the rough path, Kora was starting to feel winded. The air was becoming dangerously thin, and all of her instincts told her to rest, to conserve her strength and then continue. She looked up to tell Iolaus that when she noticed he was pulling further away.

" Hey!" she yelled. " Slow down!" Iolaus turned at her words and shook his head,

" We can't waste anymore time!" he said urgently. " The faster we get there, the faster we can get the damn bird and go help Hercules!"

" Iolaus, we'll help him! We need to help ourselves too though." Kora stumbled forward and Iolaus grabbed her arm, hauling her back up. " Thanks."

" Don't mention it." Iolaus made sure she was steady before he turned and began his upward trek again. He began to speak, almost conversationally to her.

" I HAVE to hurry - Herc is in the hands of a madman," he said, worry coloring his tone. " He'd do the same for me."

" Why didn't any of the other cadets offer to help?"

" I didn't tell anyone what was going on," Iolas admitted sheepishly, skirting a depression in the ground, making sure Kora saw it.

" You mean no one knows we're here?" she asked incredulously, acknowledging the impression and followed his trail around it.

" Not unless you count Artemis."

" That was not smart."

" Herc doesn't want ME coming after him, let alone the cadets. He'll probably kill me enough as it is."

" Such is the dream many of us have had for years," Kora deadpanned.

Iolaus grinned.

" You love me and you know it, and one day you'll admit it." He placed his hands on a large boulder and vaulted over it, before turning to see if Kora needed assistance. Kora, however, was already airborn and she landed next to him, smiling smugly.

" Thanks anyways," she cooed at him. " So, why doesn't Hercules want the cadets to save him?"

" Because he's afraid they'll get hurt by the gods. They already attack the Academy on a near regular basis. He doesn't want the gods to start pinpointing attacks on solitary cadets."

" Why are you the exception?"

" Huh?" Iolaus looked at her puzzled. " I'm not. I just choose to help."

" Even though that makes you a target?"

" You know, you're starting to sound like Hercules, " he growled. " Why is it okay for him to risk his life for the Academy, but it's not okay for anyone else to risk their life to help him when he needs it?"

" Maybe he thinks he doesn't need anyone's help."

" That's how he DOES think. He's just wrong."

" And you're the expert?"

" Look Kora," Iolaus sighed, trying to figure out how to explain his thoughts on the whole subject. " Hercules is my best friend. He saw some good in me when everyone else had me pegged as a petty thief. He's saved my life several times, and never once regretted putting himself in danger for it. And he's done the same for anyone who's ever needed help. But now, he thinks the only way to save the Academy, is to sacrifice himself, and I'm not about to let that happen. He'd never let me, if the situation were reversed."

Kora nodded thoughtfully. She knew this to be the truth, in fact, had seen the evidence whenever Hercules put himself in front of others when the gods attacked. She smiled at Iolaus who was busy picking out the trail before them, and not for the first time, envied them their friendship. Someday, she vowed. Someday I'll find a friendship as strong as those two have. She thought briefly of her sister, but knew that the friendship they had was based solely on blood and had little to do with things in common, or niceties. Someday. And if they were successful in their mission, she would be free to go and find that friendship. That thought gave her a second wind and she eagerly followed the blond hunter up the cliffs.

\* \* \*

" Wakey, wakey!" An icey cold shower sprayed Hercules awake. Shocked and disoriented, he choked up half the water before he was able to form a coherent thought. Whaa? he thought fuzzily. A screeching laugh pierced the fog in his brain and he opened dazed eyes to see Strife prancing about in front of him. " What, no good morning?"

Strife mocked him. He waved his arms and another blast of freezing water drenched Hercules, chilling him to the bone. Teeth chattering enough to make his whole body vibrate, Hercules summoned up the energy to spit at the godling.

" Eeeuuuwwww!" Strife whined. "Discord!" The sultry goddess appeared in front of Hercules in an even more daring, leather outfit. Despite his hatred, Hercules gulped, and avoided looking at her. Discord giggled knowingly.

" Aw, poor Herkie!" she cooed tracing a finger down the demi-gods lightly muscled stomach. Thanks to her skill with the whip yesterday, Hercules's clothes hung in tatters, the wounds she had previously inflicted standing out against the pale skin. She traced one particularly vicious whip lash and then, cruelly, dug her nail in. Hercules stiffened in pain, tears welling up as she tore the skin. He felt the familiar trickle of blood begin to leave yet another crimson trail down his stomach.

" Did that hurt?" she whispered in his ear, flicking her tongue at him. Then she bit him hard. Hercules cried out again and Discord finally pulled away, a smug smile on her face. Strife was laughing hysterically behind her.

" Very nice, Cordy!" he snickered. Discord laughed.

" I am the best!" she declared. Strife raised his fists and danced closer to the captive.

"Lemme try, lemme!" Strife darted in and struck Hercules solidly in the stomach. Hercules gasped and clenched up in agony, the pain in his ribs sending white hot flares up and down his beaten frame.

Gods, let this end, he prayed fervently. He closed his eyes and tried to distance himself from the pain. He felt the greyness seep in and knew he was thankfully close to oblivion when the punches stopped. Cracking one eye, he saw Discord and Strife laughing as they ate. Taking a break? he thought incredulously. He swallowed hard when he saw the various toys appear on the table in front of them. A whip, chains, and knives littered the top. He almost sobbed at the thought of what they would do to him. Thank the gods no one can see me.

" Hmm...." Discord pursed her lips thoughtfully, eyeing Hercules. " You know, this is fun, but I know a way we can make it even more interesting!"

" How?" asked Strife eagerly, rubbing his hands together in anticipation.

" Watch and learn." Discord sashayed up to the prisoner and cupped his face in one hand. When she was sure she had his attention, she began to speak.

" You know, this would be more fun for us if you cooperated."

" ..go...t-to...T-Tartarus...." Hercules gasped. Discord shook her head.

" No, no, wrong answer." Waving a hand in the air, an image of the Academy appeared, and Jason appeared in the center. Hercules strained against the confining metal.

" Wha..what.."

" The Crown Prince of Corinth," mused Discord. " Such a handsome fellow. And the future king! That is, of course, providing nothing happens to him." Jason disappeared to be replaced by a larger image of Cheiron and Fedutious watching the students in the mess hall. " So many students, so little time."

" Y-you..promised not to...h-hurt them!" Hercules panted, trying to stay conscious. Discord shrugged.

" And we will - if you ask nicely," she gave him a sinister smile. Hercules looked confused and then his heart sank as her meaning sank in. Discord picked up a length of chain. " Would you like to be punished some more?"

Hercules looked one last time at the sight of his friends, safe from harm and at peace. He knew what she wanted to hear, having heard stories about what Discord liked to do to her prisoners. Swallowing hard, he then turned back to Discord and let the last shred of his pride fly out the window.

" Yes."

" Yes what?" Discord was enjoying herself now.

" Yes," Hercules swallowed again. "...Mistress."

\* \* \*

" All I can say is this bird better be worth the trouble!" Iolaus hissed at Kora as they studied the unbelievably large temple before them. Kora ignored him as she sighed, and then raised her arms high in the air. " Artemis! I call on you for the power of the Huntress!" she spoke loudly, bracing herself. Iolaus squinted as twin beams of light shot down towards Kora, twisting and spiraling, the light growing in its intensity as it flew closer. Kora's eyes shut as the light struck her, filled her, surrounded her.

Iolaus watched in awe as she disappeared from view in the sheer brightness before reappearing. Her normal clothes gone, she now wore the garb of the Huntress. Beautiful brown leather cut short on the arms and legs for freedom of movement, trimmed with snow-white fur. Brown and white furred gauntlets covered her forearms, the leather stitching tracing an intricate pattern up to her elbows. Strong leather boots, fur-tipped as well, richer and more decorated than any boots made by a Corinthian, graced her feet. Her hair, no longer hastily tied back, was pulled severely into a braid at the top and the rest fell freely in a cascade of gentle curls. But it was her eyes that captured Iolaus's attention - where they were once blue and friendly, they were now deep brown, tinged with gold, and hard as stone. He whistled at her.

" Wow."

" Let's go." The Huntress moved swiftly past him and disappeared into

the trees lining the walkway to the temple.

\* \* \*

The two silently made their way through the underbrush, the Huntress pointing out which way to move. Fortunately, Iolaus's stint as a theif served him in good stead, and he was just as equally talented in travelling with no sound. Finally, they reached the front of the temple, still concealed in the shadows and shrubbery. Iolaus examined the two guards, holding the sharp spears. He waved his fingers at the Huntress to grab her attention and when she turned he pointed to the guards and shrugged. How? he mouthed. The Huntress pressed a finger to her lips as she closed her eyes. Iolaus was barely able to stifle the gasp of surprise when she vanished, melting into the scenery as though she had never been there. Now that's camouflage, he thought appreciatively. Could've used that trick on a couple of jobs! He was hard-pressed to quiet another sound of surprise when he felt the huntress grab a hold of his shoulder. He watched in apprehension as his feet began to disappear, then his legs, and then so on until he could only see the faint outline of himself and the Huntress. Oh my. He watched as the Huntress stealthily glided forward, and he began to follow, breathing as shallowly as possible to keep the noise down. They slipped past the two guards and through the open doors. Iolaus almost stopped dead in his tracks. It was a thief's paradise! The floor was of black and white marble, upon which rested mounds of gold and other tributes in all of its corners. Heavy tapestries of woven gold stretched from near ceiling to floor and were tied back with golden ropes. The floor raised about a foot, three-quarters of the way into the temple and there was Apollos's main audience chamber. Red silk of the finest quality carpeted the marble, richly inlaid with embroidered gold and silver. Behind the altar, a majestic throne carved of gold was anchored to the floor, strategically placed to receive the direct light of the sun and refract it in a multitude of sunbeams, each striking any dark areas of the temple that dared appear, and lighting the room until it seemed to bathed in a golden glow. Silk and satin pillows littered the throne, making it look so comfortable and inviting, Iolaus fought down the urge to go try it out. The Huntress seemed to read his mind and gave him a shove. When he turned and glared at her, she pointed at the gold, then to him, and then sliced her hand across her throat. Iolaus gulped and nodded, stepping aside to let her go first.

Once inside, the Huntress began to examine one side while motioning for Iolaus to search the other side. He felt along the wall, nimble fingers searching for a hidden door, switch, anything that would lead to another room because Kalik wasn't there as they had hoped, and there were no obvious exits from the main petitioners room. Suddenly, noise came from the temple doors and Iolaus flattened himself against the wall. Oh gods, it's Apollo, he's here, he know's we're here, he knows WHY we're here... his thoughts quit rambling when he saw a guard step inside, apparently taking a breather. Whew! He let his breath out silently and prepared to move on. Suddenly gold sparks appeared in the center of the temple heralding Apollo's arrival. Iolaus groaned internally. I KNEW this was going to smoothly. He watched as Apollo rudely dismissed the guard and then strode over to bar that appeared on the side of the temple, complete with a mortal bartender.

" Ambrosia. Now." Apollo ordered with indifference, watching with a half smile curling up at the sight of the terrified bartender

scrambling to do his bidding. Iolaus held his breath, waiting for the gods powers to alert him to the fact that there were strangers in his temple. After a few minutes, Iolaus let out the breath in a near-silent hiss, wondering what was going on. Then it struck him. He was invisible to the gods as well. The Huntress had Artemis's protection afterall. Thank you Artemis, he prayed silently, a sly grin on his face. A movement caught his eye and he turned to see Kora..no, sorry, the Huntress, frantically beckoning to him. He began to make his way to her side, pausing every few feet to ensure Apollo was unaware of his presence. Kora pulled him down beside her and pointed behind Apollo's throne.

A decorated archway, an architect's masterpiece, led the way out of the main room, and a glow emanated from the opening. Iolaus nodded and slipped in front of her, stealing his way to the door. The Huntress slithered along behind him, urging him silently to hurry. Obviously, she didn't want to push their luck. Reaching the archway, they scrambled through and were immediately blinded by a light so intense, it seared the eyes. Iolaus muffled a shout of pain and squeezed his lids shut, tears welling up of their own accord. That hurt! He felt the heat start to recede, and the light began to filter away until he could only see the aftereffects branded behind his eyelids. He slowly cracked one lid open and was rewarded with the sight of a paradise so beautiful, it took his breath away. Never let it be said the gods skimp on their gardening, he mused as he absorbed the scenery before him. It was a large room, filled to the brim with rare and exquisite plantlife. Lush trees grew strong and healthy, vines and creepers trailing their lengthy limbs in loops and curls around every crevice and branch. Wildflowers sprouted in gorgeous Greek pottery, white clay etched with black and gold in intricate swirls and designs. The flowers themselves were of every color Iolaus had ever seen, or thought he could dream up, and their fragrance filled their sniffing noses with their sweet scent. A fountain of ivory and marble had a cherub (that looked remarkably like Aphrodite's kid Cupid, Iolaus thought absently) standing in the center, water gushing through its mouth in an arc that captured the light and sprayed the pool below in a rush of falling color. Iolaus closed his mouth with a snap, as the Huntress tugged on his arm mutely and pointed to the rocks above the fountain. There, beneath the open skylight, and tethered to an ornamental perch, was Kalik.

" Jackpot!" Iolaus grinned and the two scampered over to the bird, if the Huntress could ever be known to scamper. Kalik spread his impressive wings in fear as they approached and the Huntress held back slightly, unwilling to frighten it. Iolaus slowed his pace and held his hands up peacefully.

" Hey there, Kalik," he murmured soothingly. Kalik cocked its head, it's golden eye staring at him with a piercing intensity. " We're friends of Artemis." He held out his arm entreatingly. " We're here to take you home."

Kalik seemed to calm slightly at the mention of his mistress, and obligingly settled on the cadets arm. Iolaus grunted slightly at the weight, but continued to croon at the bird while the Huntress cut it free. He was reminded of a time he freed a horse from a trap set by his home that had been meant to catch deer, by talking to it in a gentle tone for almost an hour as he manouvered the stallions neck from the noose. A false move and the horse could have strangled and

Iolaus was equally aware of the razor sharp talons Kalik possessed that were currently attached to his arm, should they make a mistake. Kora sliced through another strap with a special knife of Artemis.

"Good work," she said loftily as she changed sides and began to cut away. "Do not move or alarm Kalik."

"Well, gee, and here I planned on wrestling the thing," Iolaus muttered sarcastically. The Huntress growled at him and continued her task to free the eagle.

"Almost there..." The Huntress was on the final straps when suddenly a noise made her look up. Iolaus, busily reassuring the bird was unaware of the tension that seized her body.

"C'mon Kora, Huntress, whoever you are - finish cutting!" Iolaus said impatiently, finally tearing his eyes away from Kalik's to see what the holdup was. He saw Kora staring at a point behind him and with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, he nodded slowly. "He's behind us, isn't he?"

Kora nodded and Iolaus turned around with a sigh.

"Hey Apollo."

"You're that runt that hangs around with Hercules, aren't you?" Apollo sneered as he stepped towards them.

"Uh, maybe," Iolaus said nervously. I thought we were invisible? He watched Apollo come closer. I thought wrong.

"You dare to steal from my temple?" Apollo asked, outraged at the sheer audacity. Kora stepped forward.

"We've come to retrieve Kalik, who belongs to my mistress, Artemis," she said, her face totally free of any emotion. Apollo laughed.

"I know you - you're that Huntress person, or whatever," he waved his hand airily, dismissing her as a threat. "So what?"

"So we'll be taking Kalik with us."

"Oh, I don't think so." Apollo stopped laughing. "You see, such a pretty thing deserves to be surrounded by similar beauty."

"You just wanted him for his gold feathers," Iolaus growled. "You don't care about Kalik's feelings."

"Why should I?" Apollo shrugged. "It's a dumb beast."

"Then we'll be happy to take it off your hands!" Iolaus said quickly. "So we'll just be running along."

"Ummmm...." Apollo pretended to think about it. Then his eyes flashed dangerously. "No."

Iolaus watched Apollo gather the cosmic energy that all the gods seemed to possess and just before the god attacked, one thought ran through his head: Somehow, I don't think this is a good thing.

#### 4. Default Chapter Title

##### TEST OF A FRIENDSHIP PART 4

DISCLAIMER: I claim not ownership, but still I worship the gods that have brought yon show to mine attention. As this be the final part of mine fic, I ask you to send forth your words of wisdom, be they friendly or flame-retardent. In other words, please send me your opinions, either flames (which will be returned in kind) or flattery (in which case, send in triplicate--kidding!)!!

\* \* \*

A lone tendril of light crept in unmolested, a rarity in that dank, dark room Hercules was forced to call his home, for however long. Hercules stared at that ray of light, aching, wishing that it would make it far enough to shine on him, even just a little. He raised his eyes and watched its point of entry - a small opening through the floor. Above him, he knew, was where Ares petitioners left their offerings before leaving to await a response from their patron god. If he knew it would make a difference, he'd yell for help, but Hercules knew that by now, many followers of Ares had heard his tortured screams. He snorted. It probably turned them on, considering half of Ares petitioners were Warlords. He sighed, wincing as the slight movement caused his throat to scream in agony, and closed his eyes. But his prayers were no longer filled with pleas for rescue - no, he prayed for death, for mercy. Celestra? he whispered within his mind. Come for me. Release me. Please, before I'm too tainted to be granted access to the Elysian Fields. No golden light answered his mental cries and he resigned himself to yet another day of pain.

His mind travelled back over what Discord and Strife did to him, hot tears of shame and embarrassment spilling down his cheeks. Discord had beaten him severely with the length of chain and he had asked...no, he had begged for it. For as long as he did, Discord promised to keep her malicious hands off of his friends. Hercules felt the bile rise in the back of his throat at the thought of asking for Discord to strike him, over and over; for her to take that chain and wrap it securely around his neck, choking him half to death before releasing him and allowing him to recover. Then she did it again. And again. Hercules lost the fight with his stomach and vomited, screaming at the pain the action caused him, the sickly-sweet smell inflaming his nostrils, making him gag. He felt the familiar cloak of darkness gather around him and he thought happily, hopefully, that this was it, that his fight was over. He strained for a glimpse of his celestial sister, come to carry him home.

Then the darkness receded a bit and Hercules bit back tears of disappointment. Not yet. Drifting, awash in a sea of pain, Hercules brought forth the familiar images of his friends, carefully memorizing their features, their personalities, cherishing each memory and storing them in his heart where they would be safe. Safe. That was the whole point of this, right? Iolaus...Thoughts of his best friend made him smile. He wouldn't have to worry about being a target - the attractor of danger was gone. As long as he stays

there...

Worry suddenly pulsated through him at alarming speed and his eyes snapped open. Stay there. Since when did Iolaus ever do what Hercules told him? Hercules could count on one hand the number of times the blond hunter had left him to battle his relatives on his own, but he couldn't begin to count the scrapes he got into because he refused to let Hercules fight alone. A memory rose in his mind. It had been after the Trial, where he had proved that Discord and Strife had posed as Ares and tried to kill him, setting the God of War free. He had returned to the Academy and had been enthusiastically greeted by Jason and Iolaus who had looked a little pale at his arrival. They had thought Hercules to be dead, killed at the hands of his maniacal half-brother. That night, unable to sleep, Hercules had noticed that Iolaus's bunk was empty. Tracking his friend outside, he had seen Iolaus sitting by the well in the courtyard, tears of anguish pouring down his face. At Hercules's arrival, the blond hunter had tried to cover it up. But when Hercules refused to drop the issue (and subsequently threatened to go get the entire Academy to hold him down and force him to spill his guts), Iolaus had finally confessed his fear, and guilt. " Jason dove into the water to try and find you," he had said, referring to the moments following "Ares" attack on them before his disappearance. " I couldn't. I watched. And I thought you were dead, and that I had lost the only real friend I had." Hercules had listened and done his best to assure his friend that there was nothing he could do, that the gods were stronger than any of them and to feel guilty over something he had no control over was crazy. Iolaus had nodded slightly at that, mulling something over in his mind. Hercules remembered the determined and loyal look Iolaus had then given him.

" I won't let you go through that alone again. I promise." The two had sealed the deal of friendship with a warrior's handshake, even at that tender moment ever aware of the need to act masculine and uncaring, but at the same time, still needing the closeness that brothers shared, their concerns, fears and tensions of the day still fresh in their minds. Hercules gasped in horror. Iolaus knew that Ares had him. He would try and come after him, of that, the demi-god was certain. NO!! Desperately, he sent a plea to any of his divine siblings that might have been listening. If ANY of you, ever felt the slightest bit of friendship towards me, even the slightest, please, please, PLEASE! Keep Iolaus away from here! I can't let him risk his life when I've already given mine! I can't let him find me...see me like...like this. Please\_. Exhausted, the demi-god's head drooped and he finally sank into unconsciousness, unaware of the slight mental nudge that pushed him towards the healing comfort of the dark.

\* \* \*

Iolaus shut his eyes and waited for Apollo to charbroil him where he stood. Hearing the hum of energy and the golden god's mocking laughter, he figured this time, his luck had run out. Suddenly he heard a screech of protest as something whizzed by his head, embedding into the wall behind him with a thunk. Opening one eye, he saw Apollo pinned to the far wall with a silver arrow. Huh? He swiveled his head around and saw the Huntress drawing nocking another arrow. Whew\_!

" You'll pay for that!" Apollo snarled trying to rip the divine arrow

from his armor. Iolaus snorted.

" You must hang around with Ares, " he commented glibly. " You have all the same lines."

He ducked as Apollo launched another fireball at him. The flames missed him by inches, searing his feet. Again.

" Aw man! Do you realize how much it's gonna cost me to get these re-soled?" he whined as he flipped over to the Huntress, who fired off another shot. Soon Apollo was pinned down unable to move, as the arrows were divine in nature, and therefore as harmful to him as normal arrows were to humans. Iolaus couldn't believe it.

" We won?" He looked at Apollo wonderingly, the beginnings of one of his patented smiles beginning on his face. " We beat a God??"

The Huntress gave him a cold smile. " I beat a god," she remarked coolly. " And we did not do it alone. We owe our thanks to Artemis."

" Huh?" Iolaus searched the room quickly for a sign of the beautiful goddess. The Huntress sighed.

" The arrows," she said, handing him her quiver. Iolaus pulled out a silver arrow and studied it intently. Shimmering silver from point to tip, razor-sharp with brilliant red and violet feathers fanning out at the end.

" You didn't tell me you got new toys," Iolaus said petulantly. " I could have used a godly weapon too, you know." The Huntress shook her head in exasperation. Apollo grunted miserably from his confinement.

" You cheated," he said, with an expression that closely matched that of a child's pout. Iolaus glanced at him.

" Well, you broke the rules first," he pointed out. " We never would have had to use 'em - heck, we wouldn't even be here if you hadn't stolen Artemis's pet."

" Whatever," the sun god muttered. Iolaus cocked his head, eyes sparkling.

" You're not even trying to escape! You knew why we were here, didn't you? Oh man!" he chortled, rubbing his hands together. " Payback's a walk in Tartarus, isn't it?" Apollo growled warningly. The Huntress, sensing Iolaus was about to taunt the god even further, clapped her hand over his mouth, effectively silencing him.

" That is enough," she said sternly. Turning to Apollo, she glared at him. " On behalf of my mistress, I have reclaimed that which belongs to her. As penalty for stealing the golden eagle, you will remain captured here until Artemis sees fit to release you. These arrows will keep you from leaving."

" You can't do that!" Apollo spat at her, but Iolaus could see the bitter resignation seeping into his expression. The Huntress permitted a small smile to come to her face.

" You stole her property. Short of killing another god, Zeus's law states that the wronged god may mete out an appropriate punishment. "

Apollo refused to look at her, preferring to turn his head and sulk. The Huntress turned to Iolaus, securing Kalik's lead onto her arm. " We leave. Now."

Iolaus hastened to obey. On his way out though, he couldn't resist one last taunt, sticking his head inside the door.

" Don't hang around too lon-mmph!"

One furred gauntlet slammed across his mouth and the other gripped his collar, hauling him out.

" I said, NOW."

" Awright, awright, yeesh! Leggo of me!"

\* \* \*

" Excellent work, my children!" Artemis stroked her pet lovingly, the golden eagle cooing in obvious rapture. The goddess looked down at Iolaus and The Huntress. " You have served me well."

" It was an honor, mistress," The Huntress said reverently, bowing before her patron. Iolaus grinned.

" So when are you gonna let Apollo go?" he asked. Artemis chuckled.

" When I feel he has learned his lesson." She then tossed her arm up, allowing Kalik to soar above her while she turned her attention to more important matters. " As I have promised, you and your Academy are now under my protection." As she spoke, the winds kicked up around them. It was short-lived however - a few scant minutes and the winds disappeared back from whence they came. Artemis smiled. " It is now official."

Iolaus nodded grimly. " And the other part of your promise?"

Artemis looked over at The Huntress. " Huntress. Kora. You are now free from my service. Should you need me again though, call on me."

" I will mistress," The Huntress said. The familiar twin beams of light suddenly appeared and enveloped her again, stripping away the divine garb of Artemis, and leaving the familiar apparel of the young innkeeper. Kora blinked as the rush of power swept out of her. " Whoa!"

Iolaus grinned at her, and Kora suddenly remembered the events past.

" I'm free!" She turned to the goddess who smiled at her indulgently.

" I'm free?" The goddess nodded. " I'm FREE!!"

With a whoop, she flung her arms around the hapless Iolaus, nearly crushing him in her excitement. He hugged her back.

" Congratulations!" He released her and stepped back. " Now you can do whatever you want."

The innkeeper nodded happily. Iolaus turned to Artemis.

" Take me to Hercules please?"

Artemis frowned. " I will do as I have promised, but you must know some things first."

" Like what?"

" Come." With a wave at the ecstatic Kora, the air shimmered and the ground fell away. Iolaus only had time for one thought - \_not again\_! - before everything was swallowed up by the light.

\* \* \*

Iolaus stumbled again, as he landed.

" Warn me when you're gonna do that!" he said indignantly, picking himself up. Artemis ignored his complaints, staring past him at the forbidding, dark temple. Iolaus gulped, but then straightened. Squaring his shoulders, he prepared to enter when he found that his feet refused to move. Looking up, he saw Artemis giving him a weird expression.

" Um....correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't this the part where I go in and rescue my friend?"

" It is," the goddess said softly. " Be careful, young hunter. You are my half-brother's best friend, but even that bond may not be enough."

" Enough for what?" Iolaus asked, a sinking feeling coming over him.

" He has been hurt badly - mentally and physically." Her dark gaze met his. " He may not want you to rescue him."

" Artemis?" Iolaus voice shook slightly. " What...what did they do to him?"

Artemis shook her head sadly, and waved him forward. " Go, Golden one. And good luck."

She melted into a silhouette of swirling color before vanishing completely. Iolaus swallowed nervously and then turned on his heel. Face set in determination, he strode up to the temple gates, pausing to mentally thank the goddess for knocking out the two mammoth-sized sentries guarding the entrance. \_Ready or not Herc, here I come\_.

\* \* \*

Ares watched his sister disappear from the main gate of his temple, noting the determination in which the annoying young blond made his way to the front door. He clenched his fist, fighting back the urge to obliterate the cadet. \_This is it! This is the answer\_!

If Iolaus rescued Hercules, all his problems were solved. Zeus would

focus on Discord and Strife, since Ares hadn't touched the demi-god. And his followers wouldn't think him weak for not killing Hercules. He couldn't lose! Ares grinned. He still wanted to kill the demi-god of course, but he had no intentions of spending the rest of his immortal life stuck in a pit in the depths of Tartarus. He sighed as he realized that his chance to have Hercules as his slave was gone, had been gone since he let Discord and Strife at him first. I need to think of a really cruel punishment for them, he mused. Then a wide smile spread across his face. His chance may have been gone, but he could still have some entertainment. He remembered the condition Discord and Strife had left Hercules in. A bit of overkill, granted, but Hercules was no longer interested in being rescued. Ares chuckled. The demi-god would try to kill himself, the blond would be depressed - maybe it wasn't such a bad day after all. This was better.

Ares really hated feeling unsure about himself - made him angry. He checked his window and saw Iolaus had made it to the chamber where the door to the dungeons were. With a wave of his hand, he sent a few warriors down there to battle him. Can't make it too easy for him! And maybe he'll get himself killed anyway. Either way, it would be entertaining. Ares sat down, grabbed a bowl of fruit and settled down to enjoy the show.

\* \* \*

Iolaus brushed a strand of hair out of his eyes as he stealthily made his way through the temple. Maybe Artemis is still protecting me? he thought hopefully. If she is, then I hope she keeps it up. I'll pay her the biggest tribute ever left by a non-follower. Just as he was debating whether he should leave jewels, succulent fruit or money (Money? who am I kidding?), smoke billowed into the room, obscuring his vision and making him choke. Waving his hands in an attempt to clear the air, he was rewarded with the sight of two men dressed in black appearing before him. Nuts. He glared up at the ceiling. "You can just forget about that tribute Artemis!" he scowled, before falling into a defensive crouch. He noted one of the men had a large sword, while the other had a dagger. The one wielding the dagger was smaller. Probably faster too. He made up his mind. With lightning speed, he snapped his leg up, catching the man in the chin, knocking him back. Without pausing, he ripped his own dagger from his boot where he always carried it, and flung it at the other man. The swordsman managed to move out of its deadly path but Iolaus was gratified to see the dagger slice his opponents shoulder before embedding itself in the wall.

" Yay me!"

Then an arm wrapped around his neck and he was lifted off the floor by the man he'd kicked down. Not good. The swordsman came close, intending to inflict some damage of his own. Iolaus swung his legs up, catching the man full in the chest. He used that momentum to continue his upward arc, flipping over his assailant and landing behind him. Back on his feet, and once again facing his two opponents, Iolaus was a little more wary.

" I don't suppose you'd be willing to call this a draw, huh guys?" he asked lightly, carefully studying their movements, trying to get an idea of their next move. The men didn't even acknowledge his attempt at banter, features set in stone.

Couple of Ares-controlled puppets, Iolaus thought. He feinted to the right at the smaller man and then lunged at the other, slamming a hand into the man's face in a desperate attempt to drive the bone in the man's nasal passage right into the brain. His opponent grabbed his wrist at the last second and twisted his arm, before flinging him to the floor.

" Okay, that hurt," he muttered, rubbing his arm gingerly. " Y'know, I don't really have time for this!" As he spoke he rolled out of the way as a large boot crashed down where his head had been a moment before. Now between the two of them, Iolaus watched both men lunge at him at the same time. He barely missed the slash of the sword and the swipe of the dagger as he ducked and rolled. Please, please, please! he chanted as he felt the wind swipe his hair. Then he heard two grunts and the familiar wet sound as metal pierced flesh. He jumped to his feet as he watched the two goons slump to the ground, weapons buried between them in a grisly embrace. Blood puddled beneath them and Iolaus shuddered in revulsion. Not an experience I want to repeat, he decided.

Walking over to the wall, he yanked at his dagger, pulling as hard as he could before the wall reluctantly relinquished its claim on its prize. He checked the blade, finding it still sharp, His fingertips brushed it gently; he and Hercules had forged that blade in friendship a few months ago. Funny - they'd never actually gotten around to making one for Herc. He slipped the dagger back into the scabbard in his boot. Speaking of Hercules... He glanced around one last time, before racing through the door before him.

\* \* \*

Ares chuckled, a rarity for him to be sure. "Okay, that was a freebie, Iolaus!" he snickered, raising a glass to his lips. Now the pest would be on his guard. Who am I to disappoint? He waved his hand and sent another guard.

\* \* \*

" Go away!" Iolaus glared at the warrior who strode forth to meet him, the same bland look on his face that had been on those of his compatriots. " I'm really not in the mood for this, ya know?"

He dodged a swipe that came dangerously close to spilling his innards over the dusty floor and he backed up. The man leaped at him and Iolaus moved again, leading the man on a deadly game of follow the leader. Puffing with exertion, Iolaus finally made a move at him, feinting to the right even as his left leg snapped up. The man went down, and Iolaus dropped to a crouch, pausing to blow the hair out of his eyes with an impatient snort.

" Give me a break!" He studied the room warily, waiting for more baddies to show up. " I was afraid of THIS?"

Suddenly another man appeared. However, instead of armour, the new arrival was clad in black leather, an amused half-grin on his face. Iolaus felt his stomach become acquainted with his feet and he nervously backpeddaled. " Oh! Um...hey Ares!" Ares chuckled at the sight of the scared mortal. " Oh come on Iolaus - you can't tell me you're not having fun?"

" Fun?" Iolaus stopped walking backwards and stared at him. " You kidnapped my best friend, you've probably been torturing him, I had to battle Apollo...okay, okay, Kora helped -- a little -- and now I'm fighting YOUR warriors - who, incidentally, are not very good. I expected more from the God of War." Iolaus crossed his arms impatiently. Ares snarled at him.

" I'd watch that mouth of yours boy!" Then the anger left his face and plain amusement shone through. " Besides, if I'd sent any decent warriors, you'd have been dead before you'd known they were there."

" Would not," the blond muttered. " So then, what's the deal? Why are you letting me seemingly waltz through your temple? You KNOW that I'm coming to get Hercules."

" Of course I know!" Snapped the god irritably. " I want you too - Strife and Discord took their game a little too far, and I'LL be the one who gets blamed."

" Huh?"

" This was supposed to be MY fun!" the god ranted. " I was gonna have my revenge on Hercules! It was perfect - my hated enemy willingly turning himself over to me, FOR me to humiliate him! I could have kept him as a slave, broken him down without leaving a mark - the true mark of talent!" Ares shook his head sadly at the thought of the lost opportunities. "But those two mini-gods nearly killed the punk - and Zeus is fit to be tied."

Iolaus had sucked in his breath at the mention of Hercules's condition. " I still don't get it."

" I'm not surprised. You're gonna get Hercules and get him out of my temple before Zeus decides I'm to blame."

" Why didn't you just zap him out?" Iolaus asked reasonably.

" Hey - I still have a reputation to maintain you know. If I got him out, I'd never hear the end of it. My warlords, the gods themselves would think I was showing MERCY - they'd take my War blade away from me." Ares shrugged. " So you're gonna do it for me."

" Then why did you send those warriors after me?"

Another shrug, mixed with an evil smile. " It amused me." The smile got even wider. " But it's going to amuse me more when you leave."

" Why?"

" You know, the human spirit is surprisingly strong," Ares mused aloud, seeming to ignore Iolaus's question. " But it's not infallible. In fact, I know it's not." The mirth in his eyes shook Iolaus to the core. Ares chuckled again. " And pain doesn't have to be physical to be crippling - and any source of pain is a source of entertainment for me." With those final words, Ares vanished, leaving Iolaus alone in the passageway, fear in his heart.

\* \* \*

Hercules was in another daze. The world kept swimming in and out of focus, the pain enough to keep him conscious and uncomfortable, but not enough to knock him out. The blood had crusted on many of the cuts and lashes Discord had inflicted on him, but the sweat running down his body from the heat of the room reminded him that they were still there, the saltiness of his sweat stinging the cuts unbearably. Suddenly he heard a door slam open and he cringed, waiting for an unseen blow from his as-of-yet unknown attacker. Then he heard a gasp, a sudden intake of breath and he fought to raise his head. A blurry image presented itself: small and blond. Can't be, he thought wearily. He saw the figure come closer and he could see Iolaus' face staring at him. Must be a dream. Dream-Iolaus had shock and horror splashed all over him. Hercules closed his eyes. Thank god it's not real.

Iolaus couldn't believe the damage Strife and Discord had wrought. For a minute, he didn't think it was possible. This wasn't Hercules, not this blood-soaked, battered creature. He reminded himself of the importance of air, forcing a startled gasp from his lungs. He thought he saw Hercules twitch at the sound but he wasn't sure. He stepped up to his friend, almost timidly, afraid he might have been too late, that Hercules was already dead.

"...H-hercules?" he asked, reaching one hand out slowly to touch him.

" Not real," He heard Hercules mutter and the demi god's head dropped. Iolaus lifted Herc's head slowly, trying to see his eyes.

" Herc - it's me. Iolaus. I'm really here big guy." He struggled to keep his voice calm. Calm? Who was he kidding? He wanted to scream, he wanted to go hunt down the gods that did this, he wanted to do anything but be calm. But Hercules needed him to keep his cool, and so with a valiant effort, he took a deep breath. " Herc - I need to know if there's a key for these chains."

"...k-key.." Hercules eyes unfocused a moment and Iolaus waved his hand in front of his eyes. After a moment, the demi-god focused on the fingers and blinked.

" Yeah, Herc. Keys. Where are they?" he asked again, voice still even and gentle.

"..keys..on..on the wall..."

Iolaus released his friend gently and quickly searched the room. Near the door he came out of, he saw a large key ring on a peg in the wall. He dashed over and fairly yanked the peg clean out of the wall in his haste to get the keys. Rushing back, he stopped short at what he had to do. He took in the deep, blood-encrusted cuts on Hercule's wrists and shuddered.

" Herc - when I free your arms, you're gonna fall. I'll be right here to catch you but...it's gonna hurt buddy. " He couldn't lie to him. " It's gonna hurt a lot."

Hercules shook his head slowly, still not completely aware. " Leave

me alone," he whispered, hot tears spilling over his cheeks. Iolaus's heart clenched at the sight. He couldn't remember the last time Hercules had cried. He hadn't even cried the day of the funeral the Academy had held for his girlfriend Eurydice who had died during his battle with the god Bacchus. For Herc to be this upset, he must be in pain.

" I'm not leaving you Herc," he said resolutely, reaching up to insert the key in the massive lock above his head. He put his weight into turning it and was rewarded with a loud click as the clasp opened and Hercules's arm fell out, nearly numb from the poor circulation he'd had to endure. But it wasn't completely numb. Hercules cried out in pain and Iolaus quickly freed the other arm before lowering his friend to the ground. Hercules had, mercifully, passed out by this time, and Iolaus took a few seconds to check him out. He noted the whip marks, the bruises and burns. He gently pressed down on Herc's rib cage and felt the familiar tell-tale lumps of broken ribs. Herc's clothes hung in tatters and in some cases, were embedded in his skin, right in the wounds, courtesy of the same whip. The demi-gods breathing was also shallow, each breath a noisy rasp as he tried to get enough air into his lungs. Iolaus sat back on his heels, thinking.

" How am I going to move you without killing you?" he murmured, running a hand through his hair in frustration. Then he felt a whisper of wind touch his back and he sprang to his feet, automatically falling into a fighting stance in front of his friend to protect him. Artemis glowed briefly in front of him. Iolaus gasped.

" Don't you EVER announce your arrivals?" he nearly yelled at her. Instead, he bit his lip to keep the retort back and gestured to Hercules.

" Can you get us out of here?"

Artemis nodded. A wave of her hand, and both cadets disappeared. Artemis, however, lingered behind briefly. Ares appeared and scowled at her.

" So leave already!"

" I am, brother. Thank you for allowing me to take them from your temple," she said gently. Ares scowled even more ferociously.

" At least they're out of my hair and I'm not in trouble with pops." Ares grunted. " Next time though, I'll be able to have my fun - Discord and Strife are going to get a personal lesson from me on the differences between kill and over-kill." With those cryptic words, the God of War vanished. Artemis frowned, and left as well.

\* \* \*

Iolaus blinked as he landed on the ground. At least I didn't fall over, he thought, somewhat amused. Hercules was sprawled on the ground next to him and the smile quickly faded from his face as he rushed over to the demi-god.

" Herc?" No answer. Iolaus brushed the hair back from his face and studied his surroundings. They were close to the Academy! But how to

get help for Herc without leaving him alone\_? " Artemis, ya could've dropped us off at the front door!" he shouted.

Then he leaned over and picked up his friend. Iolaus was shocked to discover how light and fragile the demi-god seemed to be. He'd only been in Discord's tender care for a few days. He remembered asking Artemis what they did to him, and felt the same question rise forth in his mind, before hurriedly shoving it back to ask later. One arm wrapped around Hercule's waist, and the other around his own shoulder and Iolaus staggered off in the direction of the Academy. He knew he was deliberately being light-hearted - if he started panicking now, Herc was done for. He could hear the breath of his best friend rasp in and out painfully, and he could smell the scent of fresh blood as some of the wounds reopened under Iolaus' non-too-gentle care. I'm sorry Hercules, but the sooner we get to Cheiron, the better.

One foot in front of the other, Iolaus alternately half-dragged/half-carried Hercules along the path.

" You owe me so big time for this Herc!" he mock-grumbled. " I mean, giving yourself to Ares, getting beat up, and forcing ME to come to the rescue!" Iolaus listened to see if the demi-god had heard him but Hercules was still unconscious. He shut up then, and focused all his remaining energy on moving faster.

\* \* \*

Cheiron stood in front of the squad. Having adjourned to the courtyard for the cadets morning calisthenics, he noted the progress each student had made, until he came to Prince Jason. Jason looked tired and worried, his head constantly turning to look at the main gates as if waiting for someone to arrive. Cheiron sighed. Iolaus had disappeared several days ago, Hercules before that. He was worried about his cadets. Oh, he knew Iolaus was a strong fighter and the best tracker at the Academy. And Hercules was the son of Zeus, with strength and wisdom far beyond his years. But it was the two of them against the God of War, and Cheiron feared the worst.

About to call Jason over to talk, he was surprised to see the warm-up staff fall from the cadets hands and his eyes go as wide as saucers. Cheiron turned around to see two battered and beaten cadets at the gate.

" Iolaus? Hercules!" Jason rushed to the gate and stopped short of Hercules, horror dawning on his face as he took in the injuries sustained by the demi-god. He immediately took the load off Iolaus who seemed reluctant to release his hold on his friend. Cheiron found his voice.

" What happened?"

" Ares," said Iolaus hoarsely, exhausted from carrying his burden to the Academy. Then he looked at Cheiron a little funny and said, " I think I need help too." With that, Iolaus collapsed in a heap.

\* \* \*

With a moan, Iolaus slowly opened his eyes. No irritating light touched his baby blues and he blinked twice in relief before sitting up, wincing as his sore muscles protested.

" Easy there," a voice said from behind. Iolaus spun around.

" Jason?"

" Hey buddy - you okay?" The Crown Prince reached out a hand to steady the blond warrior, but Iolaus brushed his hand aside with shake.

" 'Preciate it, but I got it." Iolaus arranged himself and then peered up at his friend.

" So where's Hercules? Is he okay?"

"...."

" Jason?"

" Cheiron's with him now," Jason said, lowering his gaze. When he looked back up, his eyes were full of sorrow. " He doesn't look good."

Iolaus swallowed the lump in his throat. " Let me see him."

Jason shook his head. " He's resting..."

" He's ALONE," corrected Iolaus. " Just like he's been left alone each night since he's been gone. I promised I wouldn't let him go through anything like that alone again."

Jason hesitated. Iolaus pleaded with him.

" Come on Jase - besides, I want to be there when he wakes up so I can yell at him!" A brief smile touched Iolaus's lips but failed to reach his eyes " I got muscles I didn't know I had, SCREAMING at me for carrying his carcass around the forest!"

Jason finally relented. " Alright. But if Cheiron is mad because you're not in bed resting, it's your fault!"

" Deal." Iolaus hopped off the bed and disappeared through the door.

\* \* \*

Funny. He didn't look so bad when he'd been carrying him. Iolaus sat in a chair next to Hercules' bed in the infirmary. Studying the pale, unresponsive face, he mused over what Cheiron had said. Coma. A state in which the afflicted person falls into a deep, healing sleep. However, when they wake up can be anywhere from days to months. To years. Iolaus banished that thought from his head. He'll be fine, he thought. All that demi-god blood in his veins - I've never seen him with a cold! This is just taking a little longer, that's all.

Cheiron had also said that sometimes, those in a coma, could hear the voices of those around them, using the sound as an anchor to pull themselves out and awaken. With that in mind, Iolaus proceeded to regale his unconscious friends with tales of journeys past, and the dreams and goals of the future.

\* \* \*

Finito - for now. Challenge issued, accepted, CLAIMED!!!

End  
file.